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RETHINKING OUTSIDE THE TOOLBOX: REFLECTING AGAIN ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE AND METAPHYSICS

ABSTRACT. In a recent work, ‘Thinking Outside the Toolbox’, we mounted a qualified defence of analytic metaphysics in the face of ardent criticism. While sympathizing with other philosophers of science in decrying the lack of engagement of metaphysicians with real science when addressing central metaphysical problems, we also wanted to acknowledge the role that analytic metaphysics has played in providing useful tools for naturalistic metaphysicians. This double-edged stance compels us to identify what feature it is that marks out as problematic some, but not all, analytic metaphysics, and this we thought we could do by appeal to something we call here the compatibility principle. It now strikes us, however, that the approach we took in that earlier work is fundamentally unstable. After giving a streamlined presentation of our earlier argument, we will identify where we take the instability to lie. From there we shall make a more nuanced proposal for how naturalistic metaphysicians should regard the work of their analytic counterparts.

1. Introduction

A couple of years ago, we were fortunate enough to be invited to comment on the reflections of Michael Dummett on the state of contemporary analytic philosophy.1 We were asked, in particular, to comment upon his lament regarding the present lack of engagement between philosophy and physics. As he put it,

1 Michael Dummett was in turn invited to comment on our reflections in the same volume, but very sadly shortly after we finished writing our article he passed away.

What is a genuine case of regret is the paucity of dialogue between philosophers and physicists. The generality of philosophers know too little physics to dare to venture to treat of the philosophical problems it raises, or to take due account of physical theories when addressing problems on which they bear... Never before, I believe, have philosophy and the natural sciences been so far apart. (Dummett 2012, p. 19)

We should emphasize that Dummett is similarly disparaging of ‘scientistic’ attitudes on the part of many scientists themselves – as he says, ‘it is not from science that we know genocide is wicked, or that Michaelangelo was a great artist’ – and also of the resultant ‘shameful intimidation’ of some philosophers, ‘who hope that by humbling themselves before the sciences they will be entitled to share in some of their triumphalism’. But his frustration concerning the remove of analytic philosophy, and of analytic metaphysics in particular, from contemporary science is shared by many philosophers of physics, and we wanted to take the opportunity to consider how we ourselves stood with respect to the criticisms presented by our philosophy of physics colleagues.²

Our claim in that paper was that philosophers of physics – at least those who, like us, are interested in the metaphysics of physics – are not in any position to decry scientifically disengaged metaphysics tout court, because analytic metaphysics has proved a useful heuristic for philosophers of physics. Nevertheless, we also felt convinced that many of the examples philosophers of physics have cited in support of their anti-metaphysical stance raised genuine problems for metaphysics. What we therefore attempted to do was demarcate between the scientifically disengaged metaphysics that was prima facie somehow legitimate, and the scientifically disengaged metaphysics that we think ought to be condemned. Since then, however, we have come to regard the distinction as we drew it there as fundamentally unstable, and part of what we would like to do in what follows is to explain why.

In the ensuing, we’ll therefore present a streamlined outline of the argument of our earlier paper, before going on to highlight the instability that we now perceive in it. In a nutshell, we have come to believe that the ‘heuristic’ justification we offered for (what we took to be) a subset of analytic metaphysics cannot but sanction all metaphysics whatsoever. However, while it might sound as though this casts analytic metaphysicians as (to speak crudely) the ‘winners’ of this debate – something that Dummett himself would no doubt have been unhappy with – we ourselves think it does no such thing. We think, rather, that this conclusion serves to highlight just

² Note that since our claim will be that the most extreme claims of both sides in this debate have to be tempered, what we have to say will also have critical ramifications for the avowed ‘scientism’ of some philosophers of science, such as Ladyman and Ross (2007).