

Learning from the Past to the Future in Metaphysics

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1. Introduction: Engaging with the Past

This paper serves as a case study highlighting the significance of philosophical inquiry in actively engaging with its history, including its recent history. By "engaging," I mean the sincere consideration of the positions and arguments put forth by philosophers of the past, as well as learning from examining historical responses to these arguments. Such engagement does not entail rigidly adhering to canonical narratives of the (recent) history of philosophy or confining oneself to a specific philosophical tradition. Recognizing the intricate nature of the history of philosophy, which encompasses diverse perspectives and traditions, proves essential in uncovering a rich treasury of philosophical insights. The narratives we construct regarding the history of philosophy hold considerable importance for systematic philosophy.

In this paper, my focus is on a traditionally central field of philosophy: metaphysics. I will discuss the general metaphysical doctrine of Metaphysical Realism and especially its relevance to the discussion about the object of consideration and legitimacy of metaphysics.

The return of metaphysics in analytic philosophy since the 1970's coincides with the realist turn in analytic philosophy chiefly due to the work by Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam in the first half of the 1970's and the rise of externalist epistemology from then on (e.g., Alvin Goldman and Robert Nozick). Since the 70's, there has been a vast amount of literature about realism(s). One of its forms discerned in the literature is *Metaphysical Realism* (Miller 2022). Typically, it is considered a jointly metaphysical and epistemological or semantic doctrine (Miller 2022, Ch. 2). Considered as such, Metaphysical Realism is not only the claim that there is at least one mind-independent entity. Rather, it also involves the semantic or epistemic component that roughly, "we

can meaningfully or truthfully say something about (the nature of) the mind-independent world.”
(Miller 2022, 23)

It seems to me, however, that Metaphysical Realism proper needs to be distinguished from epistemological and semantic realism since metaphysics is the study of being in so far as it is being (see below), whereas epistemology concerns epistemic states (e.g., understanding and knowledge) and philosophical semantics is about truth, meaning, and reference (among other things). Metaphysics, epistemology, and semantics are distinct fields of philosophy.

Therefore, in this paper I follow a non-standard *working* definition of Metaphysical Realism as the ontological doctrine that *there are ontologically mind-independent entities standing in ontologically mind-independent relations*, such as numerical identity and distinctness, perhaps. One might think, for example, that there are numerically distinct physical objects that would be there even if there were no minds (e.g., the sun). Metaphysical Realism is widely held in one form or another among influential metaphysicians nowadays (e.g., Armstrong 1997, Lowe 2006, Fine 2009, and Schaffer 2009).

Accordingly, the *working* definition of the second-order view of *Metaphysical Realism about Metaphysics* (MRM), in turn, is that *metaphysics investigates metaphysically real entities and their metaphysically real relations* (whatever they are). As an illustration, E.J. Lowe defends the view that metaphysics investigates metaphysically real entities in their ontological categories, such as substances and kinds, that are not dependent on our categorisations (Lowe 2006, 195ff.). MRM presupposes Metaphysical Realism since metaphysics cannot have a metaphysically real object of consideration if there are no metaphysically real entities. Given the popularity of Metaphysical Realism, it is only expected that MRM is also widely assumed or at least sympathized nowadays, by the metaphysicians mentioned above, for instance (see especially Lowe 2006 and Fine 2009).

These working definitions of Metaphysical Realism and MRM are intentionally tentative general formulations since one of my main points is that it is the job of metaphysicians and

metametaphysicians to make them more precise and to discuss competing more exact formulations of Metaphysical Realism and MRM with their respective merits, demerits, and relations to other relevant forms of realism, such as transcendental realism discussed critically by Kant.

Since antiquity, the epistemic value of metaphysical assumptions and assertions has been challenged in the *sceptical tradition*, especially if one assumes something along the lines of MRM. The sceptical tradition encompasses for example ancient Pyrrhonists, Francisco Sanches (1551–1623), and Hume. On a reasonable reading, Hume, for instance, advances a battery of sceptical arguments to the result that metaphysically real beings transcend the limits of the human understanding that are to be respected in philosophy (Hakkarainen 2012). Furthermore, Kant’s critique of metaphysics as a *science* about transcendently real beings is well-known, targeting especially Christian Wolff’s (1679–1754) and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s (1714–62) ontologies and special metaphysics (cosmologies, rational psychologies, and natural theologies) (See Grier 2022).

The *typical* strategic move or just an (implicit) regulating assumption in the contemporary analytic metaphysics is to bypass these critiques, more or less. However, it seems to me this move is not the best exemplar of intellectual integrity since the sceptics and Kant have many arguments that need to be engaged with.

As a start for the response to them from a metaphysician’s point of view, I propose that metaphysical study is *initially* indifferent to the truth of MRM and Metaphysical Realism and does not presuppose them. Metaphysical Realism, as it is understood here, is a metaphysical doctrine the truth of which cannot be settled logically prior to metaphysical investigation. MRM presupposes Metaphysical Realism and therefore, one should not hold MRM uncritically. An *epistemological* consequence of this is that arguments against the possibility of cognition about metaphysically real entities (by e.g., Hume) are not arguments against the epistemic legitimacy of metaphysics without further arguments for MRM.

This paper is also a case study of the philosophical significance of having rich enough acquaintance with the history of philosophy, the recent history included. I begin by a recent history in the next section and then proceed to what we can learn from it in the concluding third section.

2. Learning from the Near Past

To argue for my thesis about learning from the past in metaphysics, we better look at things from a different angle than usually in analytic metaphysics. Let us learn then from the phenomenological *formal ontological* tradition in metaphysics and ontology – that is, from the recent history of philosophy. Another insight can be learned from one of the most influential German philosophers of his time, the critical realist Nicolai Hartmann (1882–1950), who also engaged with phenomenology even though he was not a phenomenologist. Both may be seen as reactions to the Neo-Kantianism of the late 19th and early 20th century, as part of the German “new ontology” after World War I; the 1920’s and 1930’s was not only the anti-metaphysics by, say, the logical positivists, such as Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970).¹

The main representatives of the phenomenological formal ontological tradition are naturally Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who coined the term “formal ontology” in his *Logical Investigations* (1900–1) (Husserl 1970), and his pupils Edith Stein and Roman Ingarden (1893–1970). It has roots

¹ This is only one instance of the need for a rich enough (recent) history of philosophy. A new ontology evolved in Germany in the 1920’s after the heyday of Neo-Kantianism: e.g., Hedwig Conrad-Martius (1888–1966), Hartmann, Max Scheler (1874–1928), Edith Stein (1891–1942), and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) (Peterson 2019: xvii). In his *Ontology: Laying the Foundations (Zur Grundlegung der Ontologie, 1935)*, Hartmann (2019, 3) also mentions Alexius von Meinong’s (1853–1920) theory of objects (*Gegenstandstheorie*) in this context even though it was developed before World War I when Neo-Kantianism still dominated philosophy in Germany. However, Meinong was born and spent his professional career in Austria-Hungary, where Neo-Kantianism did not have the same position (Damböck 2020, 173).

in the 19th century German Aristotle renaissance, too, especially in one of Husserl's professors, Franz Brentano (1838–1917) and Brentano's teacher Adolf Trendelenburg (1802–72) (Albertazzi 2006, 43 and Hartung, King and Rapp 2019, 2-4). Together with Kant and Hegel, this tradition created much interest in ontological categories (Albertazzi 2006, 53-4), which formal ontologists consider in a particular manner, as will be seen just below.

For the present purposes, Ingarden's project is the most relevant among the phenomenologists. He was a Polish philosopher trained in Poland and Germany. Ingarden's magnum opus is the three-volume *Controversy over the Existence of the World*, the two first volumes of which were written during the Second World War and published in Polish in 1947–48, respectively (*Spór o istnienie świata*). Later Ingarden reproduced these in German and *Der Streit um die Existenz der Welt* was published in 1964–65. He did not finish the third volume. Its incomplete version came out in Germany in 1974 (*Über die Kausale Struktur der Realen Welt*). Finally, the first two volumes were translated into English in Ingarden (2013) and (2016). In the *Controversy*, the fundamental question is how to put the distinction between idealism and realism precisely (Simons 2005, 39). This was motivated by Ingarden's view, right or wrong, that Husserl converted to transcendental idealism from transcendental realism just before the First World War (ibid.).

The *Controversy* is a highly intricate work and there is no need to go into all its complexities here. In this paper I will focus only on a few key points. In contrast to Meinong, for instance, Ingarden does not make any distinction between existence and being (Simons 1992, 378). Regarding the latter, he is a representative of the *mode of being* tradition in metaphysics, as well as Meinong and many others. Ingarden thinks that being is literally modified rather than unitary: there is a plurality of ways to be. (Ibid.) He does not think though that modes of being are primitive (Chrudzimski 2015). Rather, the possible modes of being, for example the mode of being of intentional objects, need to be given an exact analysis by the different aspects of these modes of

being, that is, *aspects of existence*, such as various ontological dependences (Chrudzimski 2015 and Millière 2016). Among the modes of being, those of *being ideally* and *being really*² call for an analysis prior to trying to settle the issue of whether idealism or realism in any form is true (Chrudzimski 2015 and Millière 2016).

In Ingarden's case, it is crucial to appreciate that his conception of ontology is Husserlian. For him, following Husserl, ontology is the a priori discipline of what is essential to *possible* objects in general (Simons 2005, 40–1). Ontology differs from metaphysics, which investigates *what is*: for example, whether there are real beings (ibid.). Therefore, Ingarden's ontological analysis concerns primarily possible rather than actual modes of being.

Accordingly, Ingarden thinks that *being really* calls for an ontological analysis prior to trying to settle the metaphysical question about the existence of real beings. To be precise, the analysis of the mode of being of *being really* by aspects of existence belongs to a sub-field of ontology that Ingarden calls "existential ontology" (from "aspects of existence"), to which the first volume of the *Controversy* is devoted. Existential ontology differs from *formal ontology*, which Ingarden discusses in the second volume. Formal ontology investigates possible ontological categories (e.g., properties and processes), which differ from modes of being in Ingarden's view. He does not take ontological categories as primitive either. Possible ontological categories are analysed first by modes of being and then ultimately in terms of aspects of existence. (Chrudzimski 2015 and Millière 2016)

As the present-day formal ontologist Peter Simons (2005, 41) has pointed out, Ingarden's three-partite distinction between ontological categories, modes of being, and aspects of existence

² Here I write "being really" adverbially instead of "being real" in order to highlight the point that modes of being are ways of being literally modifying being.

can be reduced to the distinction between ontological categories and the ways in which entities exist. Following this reduction, I can say that the basic idea of *formal ontology* as a main branch of metaphysics is that it investigates *ontological categories* analysing them by the ways in which entities exist – that is, by forms of being or *ontological forms* (Hakkarainen and Keinänen 2023, Chs. 1 and 3). In formal ontology, existential dependence, for instance, is construed as an ontological form: existing *dependently*.

This does not entail, however, that ontological forms are modes of being, which would mean literal modifications of being. Without going into unnecessary details, I have argued that ontological forms are internal relations of a specific type called “formal ontological relations” in which entities stand (ibid., Ch. 4). Entities are in one and the same sense, but they stand in distinct formal ontological relations. Here the relevant point is that one can be a formal ontologist without being a mode of being theorist. (Ibid.) Formal ontology does not commit one to literal modes of being. Regarding ontological categories, we can take substances as an example of their analysis by ontological forms. An entity may be considered a member of the category of substances if the entity exists in the ontologically independent, numerically identical, persisting, and property-bearing way.

In accordance with this, I have proposed that it is illuminating to make a three-partite distinction between formal ontology, ontology, and general metaphysics (ibid., Ch. 5.3). To avoid a needless digression, here I simply assume this distinction without arguing for it. Concerning ontology, I follow more or less the mainstream Quinean line that ontology studies what there is (cf. metaphysics in Ingarden). This conception of ontology is reasonable, since “ontologia” is an early 17th century neologism coming from “ontos” and “logos” in Greek (see Lamanna 2014 and Smith 2022). “Ontos” is the possessive form of the Greek equivalent to “being” and “logos” means study or doctrine in this context. In the Quinean conception of ontology, “ontos” is understood in the *thing sense* of “being” meaning an entity (thing) or the totality of entities (*everything*) (*ein Seiendes* or *das Seiende* in German and *olio* or *oleva* in Finnish).

However, “being” is ambiguous in English. Another sense of “being” is that which is shared by all entities: by definition, each and every one of them is there (in one way or another). Following English dictionaries, let me call this “the state sense of being”: the state or condition of every entity is being there (*das Sein* in German and *oleminen* in Finnish).³ If “ontos” is taken in this sense of “being”, then, in contrast to the Quinean conception, ontology is considered differently as the study of being in the state sense: *what it is to be*. This is rather the case in the German early modern conception of ontology as the science of being in general in Wolff and Baumgarten although their conceptions differ in detail (Lamanna 2014 and 2021). Hartmann agrees with it in his “fundamental question of ontology” “formally understood”, as will be seen below (2019, 53). Above, I mentioned a third use of “ontology” in the Husserlian conception of it as the a priori science of the essence of possible objects as such. A fourth conception of ontology is the study of any object of thought and language in some historical conceptions (Jaroszyński 2018, 98 and Lamanna 2021).⁴

I supplement the Quinean conception of ontology as the study of what there is with the problem about the possible *ground of being* (Hakkarainen and Keinänen 2023, Ch. 5.3). This problem is not incompatible with the Quinean conception even though some metaphysicians think that the problem of ground is the ultimate question in metaphysics, rather than the Quinean existence question about what there is (e.g., Schaffer 2009). Therefore, I propose that the fundamental question of ontology in plain English is, *what is there and why?* Here “why” is roughly construed as asking the possible ground of being (in the thing sense) in virtue of which entities are

³ It does not follow from this that being is a numerically distinct entity in the category of states, or, indeed in any ontological category. I use “state” here as a metaphysically neutral linguistic term. I also set aside the question how being is supposed to be expressed in language and thinking (whether by a quantifier or predicate, for instance).

⁴ For a recent general history of the conceptions of metaphysics and ontology, see Jaroszyński 2018.

there. Therefore, the fundamental ontological question is, to put it more precisely, what are entities and their ground(s)?

By contrast, formal ontology studies possible and actual ontological forms and ontological categories by analysing categories in terms of ontological forms. General metaphysics, in turn, considers being in the state sense, its features, such as its unity/plurality and relation to existence and nothingness, and the possible principles of being like the principle of non-contradiction. A crucial further point is that general metaphysics and formal ontology constitute a point of view from which ontology investigates entities and their ground. For example, if one asks the ontological question whether there are mind-independent universals, the framing of the problem presupposes something about being and the category of universals. (Ibid.)

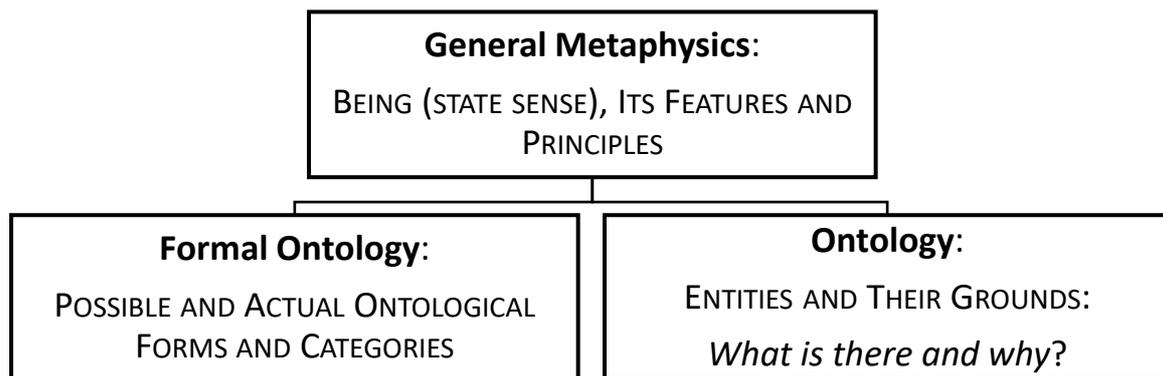


Figure 1 Main Branches of Metaphysics

Moving on to Hartmann, his insight about the beginnings of metaphysics is three-fold: (1) general metaphysics (in my terms) comes logically first and (2) begins with the question about being in the state sense, and (3) metaphysics is initially indifferent to the truth of Metaphysical Realism (again in my terms). We may learn his insight from his struggle with the epistemological Neo-Kantianism of his teachers Herman Cohen (1842–1918) and Paul Natorp (1854–1924) at his *alma mater* Marburg.

Especially illuminating is Hartmann’s “problem of being” (*Seinsproblem* in German), the starting point of which, “the fundamental question of ontology”, is Aristotle’s (1958, 1003a 21)

being as being (*to on hê on* in Greek: literally, ‘that which is in so far as it is’) (Hartmann 2019, 53). Hartmann explicitly distinguishes his problem of being from Heidegger’s “question of being” (*Seinsfrage*) that asks the meaning of being (*Der Sinn von Sein*) (Hartmann 2019, 53–8). Hartmann thinks that “critical ontology” begins by asking what being *itself*, in the state sense (*das Sein selbst*), is (i.e., what it is to be), rather than the meaning of being. Critical ontology does not start with the assumption or even the presupposition that being is dependent on or independent from, in one way or another, the subject cognizing it. In its beginnings, critical ontology considers being that is universally shared by all the beings and on which the cognizing subject does not impose any conditions. (ibid., 53–4) This is “the fundamental question of ontology” about being as being “formally understood” (ibid., 53).

Accordingly, Hartmann adopts Aristotle’s “formula” of being as being for the reason that “because it considers what is [being in the thing sense] only insofar as it is, thus, only in its most universal aspect, it indirectly comes across “being” [in the state sense: *Sein*] over and above “what is” nonetheless.” (ibid., 53) In short, the problem of being, that is, what it is to be, is logically prior to considering what there is.⁵ I agree with Hartmann.

Hartmann thinks that critical ontology and the problem of being are initially indifferent to realism and idealism, transcendental realism and idealism in particular, although he eventually favours realism undogmatically (Peterson 2012, 295–6 and Hartmann 2019, 51–4). Hartmann does not take any stance on the subject-dependence or subject-independence of being in the state sense at the beginning of ontology and metaphysics.

⁵ This holds also of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, in Vasilis Politis’ view (2004, 3).

3. Prospects for the future

To conclude, I shall argue briefly that Ingarden and Hartmann indeed have a point from which metaphysics can learn. Following Aristotle, metaphysics is the study of being in so far as it is being. Therefore, Metaphysical Realism is, indeed, a metaphysical doctrine since it makes a claim that there are beings of a certain highly general sort: metaphysically real beings. If there are such entities, their being is of the metaphysically real sort. As this is still imprecise, *being metaphysically real* needs to be made exacter in order to be able to discuss whether there are such entities. We need to have a sufficiently exact grasp of the type of entities the existence of which we are investigating.

Here formal ontology proves to be helpful. Being metaphysically real is a plausible candidate for an ontological form since its tentative characterization is being independently from the mind. It is then a formal ontological problem informing the ontological doctrine of Metaphysical Realism how independence is to be specified here, assuming *hypothetically* for the sake of consideration that there are ontologically mind-independent entities. Is ontological independence existential or essential, for instance identity independence (see Tahko and Lowe 2020)? Is it rigid (specific) or, as it seems to be, non-rigid or generic (*ibid.*)? In principle, an entity like the sun can depend for its *existence* or *identity* on a distinct entity, *modally* or *essentially* in non-modal terms.⁶ It might be, for instance, that metaphysically real entities do not depend for their non-modal essence on any mind. Equally, an entity, such as the sun, may depend for its existence on a *specific* entity or a *type* of entities. The denial of the latter non-rigid dependence seems to be at play in the formulation of Metaphysical Realism. But is it so?

⁶ To most metaphysicians nowadays, the non-modal conception of essence is familiar from Kit Fine (1994). E.J. Lowe characterises it as follows: "In short, the essence of something, *X*, is *what X is*, or *what it is to be X*." (Lowe 2018, 16) This characterisation does not involve any modal term. By contrast, the *modal notion of essence* is roughly the de re necessary properties of an entity.

Generally: *if* there are metaphysically real entities, what is the correct analysis of their ontological form? Most likely, this kind of analysis produces different formulations of Metaphysical Realism, which can be then discussed critically in metaphysics. Whatever the case may be, answering these questions concerning what it is to be metaphysically real are presupposed by the very ontological problem setting about Metaphysical Realism: concerning the existence of metaphysically real entities in their metaphysically real relations. Formal ontology comes logically first in relation to ontology, which is the doctrine of *formal ontology first* by me and Markku Keinänen (Hakkarainen and Keinänen 2023, Ch. 5).⁷

Furthermore, general metaphysical considerations of being in the state sense, its features, unity/plurality, and principles are *initially* indifferent to the truth of Metaphysical Realism. Metaphysical Realism comes to play in metaphysics only if we have good enough grounds to specify that it is *metaphysically real* being we are considering. If one is justified *not* to do that specification in a metaphysical study, it is possible to conduct the study and not to assume Metaphysical Realism.

This has consequences for ontology: Metaphysical Realism is relevant only if ontological problems presuppose or address it. The perennial topic of the existence of ontologically mind-independent universals, for instance, is an instance of such a case that presupposes Metaphysical Realism. One cannot even set the problem of their existence without having a sufficiently precise grasp of what it is to be metaphysically real. Equally, formal ontological problem settings presuppose something about general metaphysical matters, such as whether being is modified or not.

⁷ Temporal order is a different issue. Conducting formal ontological study need not *temporally precede* ontological investigations. Rather, they may well be studied as a part of a single process of addressing metaphysical problems.

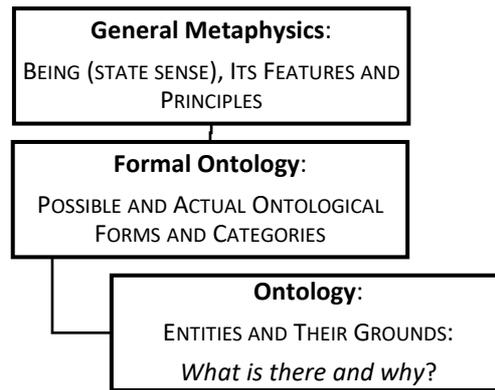


Figure 2 Main Branches of Metaphysics in Their Logical Hierarchy

Social ontology confirms that metaphysical study does not initially presuppose Metaphysical Realism. As a minimum, there are social ontological problems that concern possible entities that are ontologically *dependent* on the mind in one way or another, such as the existence and nature of some social kinds (e.g., gender and race) and institutions (e.g., money and university).⁸ Arguably, these entities would not be there if there were no minds; they depend for their existence non-rigidly or generically on minds, at least in modal terms. Still considering them is metaphysics since then one considers being in a manner that is closely informed by general metaphysics and formal ontology. Part of these problems is to make the type of ontological dependence exact.

Indeed, they presuppose Metaphysical Realism only if there can be nothing ontologically mind-dependent social in some relevant sense without there being something ontologically mind-independent in the same relevant sense. However, the truth of the latter proposition is an open metaphysical question not to be decided logically prior to investigation. We need to keep an open mind for the possibility along the idealist line that there are ontologically mind-dependent entities but no ontologically mind-independent entities.

⁸ I consider only Metaphysical Realism here and set aside other forms of realism relevant to social ontology, since this is not a paper about that topic.

Regarding the *object of consideration* of metaphysics, the upshot is that without a justified specification to metaphysically real being, metaphysics is not a field studying such being in either the thing sense or the state sense; metaphysical anti-realists can claim to study being. If it turns out that Metaphysical Realism is not justified, it does not follow that metaphysics cannot have any proper object or subject matter in some other reasonable sense. Metaphysical investigations may concern or even arrive at truths about entities although they are not *metaphysically* real in accordance with my working hypothesis about Metaphysical Realism (e.g., some social entities).

In metaphysics, one should not assume the truth of Metaphysical Realism *uncritically*, still less implicitly. Metaphysical Realism is a metaphysical doctrine the justification of which is the task of the metaphysician. Neither can the age-old metaphysical controversy over realism and idealism be properly discussed without making its problem-setting exact. It calls for formal ontology discussing what the distinction between real and ideal entities is precisely. The relation between Metaphysical Realism and transcendental idealism by Kant or Husserl, for instance, is a complicated matter that calls for investigation. As was seen above, this is Ingarden's foremost motivation for his main work.

This upshot about Metaphysical Realism has consequences for MRM. Recall that MRM is the methodological second-order doctrine that can be given the following working characterization: the object of investigation of metaphysics consists in metaphysically real entities and their metaphysically real relations (e.g., numerical distinctness). MRM presupposes Metaphysical Realism, which needs to be justified by metaphysics. Therefore, it is not warranted to believe logically prior to metaphysical study that the object of consideration of metaphysics consists in metaphysically real entities; one must not put the cart before the horse. MRM is not to be assumed *dogmatically*, as Hartmann pointed out (in slightly different terms).

An epistemological consequence of all this is that arguments against the possibility of cognition of metaphysically real entities (e.g., Hume 2000 [1748], sec. 12) are not arguments

against the epistemic legitimacy of metaphysics without further argument. They are so *only if* one makes a justified specification to Metaphysical Realism, that is, only against metaphysically realist metaphysical and metametaphysical views like MRM. This result indicates that our doctrine of *formal ontology first* provides a useful platform for discussing the epistemology of metaphysics in addition to its other merits. That is, however, a prospect for the future study.

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