METAPHYSICS
5 QUESTIONS

edited by

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Preface

Metaphysics has always occupied a special place in philosophy. For those attracted to it, metaphysics is the discipline where we are allowed to concentrate on the most basic and exciting questions that can be asked—questions that, according to its practitioners, are often presupposed by other fields of philosophical and scientific inquiry. But metaphysics is also the most notorious subject of philosophy, and when philosophy from time to time is derided as obscure guesswork and idle speculation, metaphysics is usually first in the line of criticism.

After a period in disrepute in the last century, it seems that metaphysics is once again entering a golden age. Rather than withering away, metaphysics has emerged from the purgatory of logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy as a more disciplined and focused field of inquiry than ever. New formal tools and methods of analysis are brought to bear on the ancient questions, in a pace that makes it difficult to keep abreast with all the exciting developments.

Metaphysics: 5 Questions is an attempt to record some of these developments in a somewhat more personal and informal manner than that found in conventional academic papers. The volume is a collection of interviews with some of the most eminent and influential metaphysicians of the last few decades. Each contributor has been asked to answer the following five questions, pertaining both to their personal path through the world of metaphysics, and to their views on the status and methodology of metaphysics as it is practiced today:

1. Why were you initially drawn to metaphysics (and what keeps you interested)?

2. What do you consider to be your most important contributions to metaphysics?
3. What do you think is the proper role of metaphysics in relation to other areas of philosophy and other academic disciplines, including the natural sciences?

4. What do you consider the proper method for metaphysics?

5. What do you consider to be the most neglected topics in contemporary metaphysics, and what direction would you like metaphysics to take in the future?

The questions, particularly the ones concerning the methodology and relation of metaphysics to other scientific fields, are far from easy. Indeed, one may be excused for thinking that a book of this format is an inappropriate venue for the proper consideration of such weighty issues. Nevertheless, I hope that the reader will find that the informal and candid style of the interviews helps to demystify somewhat how metaphysical research is actually done, or at least how its most eminent practitioners take themselves to be doing it. The personal accounts of the contributors’ way into metaphysics, and their estimation of the importance of their own work in the field, may also contain important lessons, or at least encouragement, particularly for those on their way into the world of metaphysics. Whatever you take away from them, I hope that you will find the interviews as enjoyable and stimulating as I have.

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Why were you initially drawn to metaphysics (and what keeps you interested)?

Initially I was not drawn to metaphysics. I was drawn to philosophy. I therefore simply began studying philosophy in general and that meant to me philosophy as a universal theoretical enterprise with a long and very rich tradition. Within this tradition I encountered great philosophers whose thinking was called “metaphysical” (in some sense). I became interested in the thinking of some of those philosophers, including among others Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Whitehead. Later, I became acquainted with analytical philosophy and investigated its highly significant trajectory from nonmetaphysical and in some cases explicitly antimetaphysical positions to one of accepting and developing what analytical philosophers today call “metaphysics”. But I have never primarily termed my own thinking “metaphysical,” although I do not entirely reject this designation. The reason is that the term “metaphysics” has a long and very complicated—not to say chaotic—history that renders its usage extremely ambiguous unless it is preceded by careful explanation. I most especially disagree with the usage current analytical philosophers make of the term “metaphysics,” because what they understand this term to designate covers only a small sector of the huge range of contents and topics included within the scope of what the Western philosophical tradition terms “metaphysical.” I therefore prefer the term “comprehensive systematics,” which I use to designate an essential part of the kind of systematic philosophy I take to be central to the philosophical enterprise. The architectonic of the specific system-
atic philosophy I presented in 2006 in *Struktur und Sein* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck) and in its English version, *Structure and Being* (translated and in collaboration with Alan White—to whom I also owe a significant debt for very many conversations and suggestions about the central ideas of this paper as well as for improving its English version—) consists of the following parts: global systematics, systematics of theoreticity, systematics of structure, world-systematics, comprehensive systematics, and metasystematics.

The answer to the question what keeps me interested in “metaphysics” ensues from what has been explained and is twofold. First, since philosophy in my understanding must be systematically oriented, I cannot neglect those essential parts of it that I call the systematics of structure, world-systematics, and comprehensive systematics, which relate in ways indicated below to what has been called “metaphysics” in the history of philosophy. Second, my special interest in so-understood “metaphysics” derives from the fact that I consider its neglect to be the most deficient and regrettable aspect of analytic philosophy. In my opinion the development of a metaphysical conception that does not reduce metaphysics to quite few questions, as do many contemporary books, handbooks, lexica etc., is one of the most important and urgent tasks in contemporary philosophy.

**What do you consider to be your most important contributions to metaphysics?**

At the beginning of my philosophical career I set out to outline the idea of a systematic philosophy (I never planned to develop a “philosophical system” of the sort envisaged by the German idealistic philosophers). Because I wanted to take into account, as far as possible, the entire richness of ideas propounded by the most important philosophers, it was a long time before I got to the point where I could try to present my own conception of systematic philosophy. My most important historicocritical studies in the history of philosophy, written and published during this long period of time, have been reprinted in a volume published in 2007 (*Auf der Suche nach dem Gegenstand und dem Theoretestatus der Philosophie — Philosophiegeschichtlich-kritische Studien*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck Verlag). As indicated above, I presented my own conception of systematic philosophy—the *structural-systematic philosophy*—in *Struktur und Sein* (and *Structure and Being*). This philosophy arose from three insights, which can be formulated as three theses, resulting from a long
and intensive occupation with the fundamental philosophical concepts from history and of the present. The first thesis is that throughout most of its long history, philosophy has attributed to itself a comprehensive character, even if that character has taken various distinct forms. The second thesis is that contemporary philosophy – and quite particularly so-called analytic philosophy – does scarcely any justice to this universal character of philosophy, in that it exhibits, virtually exclusively, a fragmentary character. The third thesis is that analytic philosophy has developed powerful methodical and formal tools enabling philosophical thinking to get to high degrees of clarity and rigor.

Central to the structural-systematic philosophy is the concept of the theoretical framework, which it presents in connection with and as a modification of the concept, introduced by Rudolf Carnap, of the linguistic framework. The account proceeds from the fundamental insight that every theoretical questioning, every theoretical sentence, argument, every theory, etc., is intelligible and evaluable only if understood as situated within a sufficiently determinate or determinable theoretical framework. If this presupposition is not made, then everything remains underdetermined: the meaning of any given sentence, its assessment, etc. To every theoretical framework belong a language (with its syntax and its semantics), a logic, and a conceptuality, along with all of the other components that constitute a theoretical apparatus. Failure to attend to the dependence of theories on frameworks – or, as is most common, failure even to recognize it – is the source of countless catastrophic mistakes from which philosophy has suffered throughout its history and into the present. It should be added that as a matter of fact there is a plurality of theoretical frameworks that are or have been relied on and an immensely larger plurality of them that are possible.

The other central concept of the structural-systematic philosophy is structure, a concept taken from mathematics and applied in a suitable way to all philosophical topics. This philosophy develops three kinds of fundamental structures relevant to philosophy: the formal (logical and mathematical), the semantical, and the ontological fundamental structures. Opposing the currently dominant “compositional” semantics based on the principle of compositionality, the structural-systematic philosophy develops an alternative semantics that is based on a strong version of the Fregean context principle: “Only in the context of a sentence do words have meanings.” One of its central theses is that sentences
of the subject-predicate form are not acceptable for any philosophical language equipped with an appropriate semantics; what makes them unacceptable is their ontological consequences. (If, as can hardly be avoided, sentences with the subject-predicate syntactic form are nevertheless used, they must be semantically interpreted and understood as convenient abbreviations of sentences without subjects and predicates.) The ontology that corresponds to subject-predicate sentences is so-called “substance ontology.” *Structure and Being* demonstrates that this ontology is unintelligible and therefore unacceptable.

Sentences without subjects and predicates, like “It’s raining,” are termed “primary sentences;” they express “primary propositions” that are more precisely interpreted as “primary semantic structures.” The qualifier “primary” is not a counterpart to anything like “secondary,” and is not to be understood as synonymous with “simple” (or “atomistic,” as in “atomistic sentence”). The term “primary” designates sentences that do not have the subject-predicate form. It is therefore wholly consequent to speak of “simple primary sentences and propositions” and of “complex primary sentences and propositions” (i.e., sentences or propositions that consist of more than one and indeed often of a great many simple primary sentences or propositions).

The ontological structures emerge directly from the semantic ones in that semantics and ontology are two sides of the same coin. The only ontological “category” (according to traditional terminology) is the “primary fact,” which *Structure and Being* interprets as and calls “primary ontological structure.” According to the theory of truth the book elaborates, primary sentences express primary propositions, which, when true, are identical with primary facts (in the world). All “things” (in more appropriate philosophical terms: all beings or entities) are configurations of primary facts (of primary ontological structures). The term “fact” is taken in a comprehensive sense, corresponding to the way this term is often used at present (e.g., “semantic fact”, “logical fact,” etc.). The concept of the configuration of primary facts or of complex primary facts (thus also, correspondingly, of configurations of primary sentences/propositions or complex primary sentences/propositions) emerges as one that is central within the structural-systematic philosophy.

On this basis, the structural-systematic philosophy is, according to its “quasi-definition,” a theory of the most general or universal structures of the unrestricted universe of discourse. The
structural-systematic program investigates the unrestricted universe of discourse by presenting it as the comprehensive configuration of these fundamental structures or, in other words, it discovers and articulates the structures of the universe of discourse. In the book’s terminology, structures are connections or configurations and all entities, simple and complex, are such configurations. The unrestricted universe of discourse is the totality of all structures/configurations.

Comprehensive systematics emerges when the question is asked as to whether the various simple and complex configurations/connections, including the entire theoretical dimension, i.e. the theorizing subjects, the ideal theoretical world, all the formal structures etc., constitute or presuppose an all-encompassing configuration/connection, such that the entire unrestricted universe of discourse, as the comprehensive primary fact, is itself subjected to theorization. The structural-systematic philosophy upholds an affirmative response and calls this all-encompassing dimension the primordial dimension of being. In a certain sense, then, the structural-systematic philosophy is inspired by Heidegger’s epoch-making step of renewing the question of being. To be sure, I consider the manner in which Heidegger addressed the question completely unacceptable. His strange misconception and rejection of logic, of conceptual and especially of rigorous thinking and his increasing inclination to use a poetical language cannot be considered a valuable way of doing serious philosophy. My own way of developing a comprehensive systematics (in Chapter 5 of Structure and Being) consists in taking absolutely seriously the grand question concerning the connection of all elements or all configurations of the unrestricted universe of discourse and in treating this question by means of the theoretical tools elaborated in the long tradition of logically oriented philosophy and most especially in analytic philosophy.

In using the expression “(the primordial dimension of) being” I don’t presuppose any special meaning of “being”. I introduce this expression in order to designate the all-encompassing dimension just indicated. So, “being” is not what in general is called “existence,” neither in the traditional sense (i.e., to designate what characterizes the dimension “outside” our thinking) nor in various other senses, for instance, in Quine’s sense (“existence is what existential quantification expresses”).

It should be noted that I don’t simply identify “metaphysics” with the comprehensive systematics just explained. “Metaphysics” in this sense has been present in some respects (albeit almost
always implicitly) in the works of some great thinkers, especially in those of Thomas Aquinas, who wrote important things about *Being* (*esse*) as well as about *beings* (*entia*). As is well known, Heidegger criticized what he called “(Western) metaphysics,” without distinguishing among its often highly diverse forms, for having forgotten “Being (*Sein*)” (“forgetfulness of being,” *Seinsvergessenheit*). He is right only in part, as I have shown in several writings and will show in a forthcoming book. Until about the 18th-century the term “metaphysics” was used in many senses, which is not surprising given its controversial origin in the wake of Aristotle. But in general and to a certain extent the term designated both a general or universal discipline in conjunction with special or particular disciplines. Christian Wolff (+ 1754) and his disciple Alexander Baumgarten (+ 1762) “systematized” (in a certain sense) this widespread traditional sense of metaphysics by defining it as a conjunction of four disciplines: ontology, general cosmology, rational and empiric psychology, and natural theology. Wolff termed the four disciplines “the complete work of metaphysics (*integrum metaphysicae opus*)” (*Theologia Naturalis* (1737), *Praef*). A fundamental distinction was then made between ontology—also called First Philosophy (Wolff) or Universal Metaphysics (Baumgarten, *Metaphysica § 4*)— and three particular or special disciplines. This distinction has come to be known as that between *general metaphysics* and *special metaphysics*. General metaphysics as ontology deals with the general properties of all beings (*entia, Seiende*), whereas special metaphysics treats three specific (kinds of) beings (*entia, Seiende*) within its three subdisciplines: cosmology considers the world and its non-human beings, psychology, the human mind or soul, and natural theology, the supreme being, i.e., God. This concept of metaphysics exerted a powerful influence on many philosophers, including, perhaps most importantly, Kant and Heidegger.

What *Structure and Being* calls “comprehensive systematics” cannot be identified with any of the disciplines identified by Wolff and Baumgarten, because their division has no place for theories of *Being* (*Sein, esse*) as such and as whole. Their “general (or universal) metaphysics” explicitly concerns only beings (*Seiende, entia*). Furthermore, according to *comprehensive systematics* “God” is not a topic belonging to special metaphysics, because God is not conceived of as “a being (*Seiendes, ens*),” not even the First or Highest or Supreme Being. Instead, *Structure and Being* shows that God should be thought as (Absolute, Necessary) *Being* (in
of “Sein, esse”), not in the sense of “a being, (Seiendes, ens)”. If the term “metaphysics” is used in the sense just explained of comprehensive systematics, then an additional qualifier is required; one appropriate candidate is “grand.”

Within the structural-systematic philosophy, the distinction between “general” and “special” metaphysics can be retained, but only on the condition that they are not understood in the traditional and currently prevailing senses. According to the new sense, “general metaphysics” would be identified with most of the Systematics of Structure: the Fundamental Structures (Chapter 3 of Structure and Being) and with some topics dealt with in the Comprehensive Systematics (thus, in Chapter 5); one could introduce an additional qualifier, yielding “general-structural metaphysics”. The term “special metaphysics,” according to the new sense envisaged here, would cover only and quite exactly what in Structure and Being is called “World-systematics” (the topic of Chapter 4).

In sum: within the framework of Structure and Being the term “metaphysics” is intelligible and illuminating if and only if the threefold distinction just introduced is made: grand metaphysics—general-structural metaphysics—special metaphysics. Worth noting is that Structure and Being uses the term “metaphysics” only in the sense of grand metaphysics, although it does not specify that this is the case.

What do you think is the proper role of metaphysics in relation to other areas of philosophy and other academic disciplines, including the natural sciences?

The question of the proper role of metaphysics (in the three senses just explained) in relation to other areas of philosophy is in my view one of the most important and urgent questions in contemporary philosophy. The fact that this question is wholly ignored or neglected constitutes one of the most serious weaknesses of analytic philosophy. Analytic philosophy remains extremely fragmentary. In general it treats single questions in complete isolation. To be sure, there are certain – and important – features all analytic philosophers more or less share, but they are virtually exclusively methodological and instrumental ones: conceptual clarity, argumentative strength, use of logical-mathematical tools, and the like. But those features are by no means sufficient to establish what could be called a coherence among the treatments of questions belonging to different philosophical areas as regards their theoretical content.
Perhaps the most significant example of this failure is analytic philosophy of mind. It purports to develop an ontological conception of the human mind. In doing so, it must rely—and in fact it relies—on fundamental ontological assumptions. But what kind of ontology is presupposed by philosophers of mind? As a matter of fact this question remains almost always completely unexamined. One presupposes the “normal” analytic ontology of “objects” that have “properties” and stand in “relations” with each other. It is simply the direct continuation of Aristotelian ontology as generally understood. That instead of “substance” the term “object” is used obscures the real status of and the issue posed by this ontology. It is an ontology, in one appropriate phrase, of middle-sized dry goods. But what is a dry good—what is an object? The usage of first-order predicate logic to formalize the ontological commitments masks the real problem. In saying that a property is predicated of or attributed to an object, one takes the object to be the presupposed X of which the property is predicated (or to which it is attributed). What is this X as such? If all properties are thought away, what remains? A “bare particular”? This putative entity called “object” (traditionally: “substance”) is a pseudo-entity, because it cannot be made intelligible. Some analytic philosophers have pointed to this serious problem, but the discussions of it have not significantly changed the theoretical scene, most especially in the philosophy of mind. Many philosophers of mind distinguish, for example, between mental and physical properties and attribute both to an “object” (called “mind” or “human being” or the like) they consider to be a physical entity. But what can this “object” be? Given the unanswerability of this question, the central questions in the various distinct philosophical areas, but most especially in the philosophy of mind, require radical rethinking of the ontology accepted or presupposed.

To correctly answer the question regarding the proper role of “metaphysics” in relation to other areas of philosophy the threefold sense of metaphysics introduced and explained above must be taken into account: special metaphysics, general(-structural) metaphysics, and grand metaphysics. Today’s analytic metaphysics is almost completely restricted to special metaphysics and to certain topics from general(-structural) metaphysics, namely, to the treatment of single domains, single questions, and some central concepts, as the many books and articles devoted to analytic metaphysics clearly show. The interconnections among those domains are largely neglected, although there are significant efforts aiming
to clarify some conceptual topics including the (metaphysically understood) modalities, essentialism, and the like, that are suitable tools for articulating at least some fundamental aspects of those interconnections.

Grand metaphysics, as I understand and explain it in the sense of comprehensive systematics, is not a theory about beings or domains of beings; it is instead a theory about being itself, being as such and as a whole. In my view, grand metaphysics is absolutely indispensable for a philosophy that endeavors to be critical and thoroughly rational. The reason is that every philosophical theoretician presupposes (albeit usually implicitly) some kind of grand-metaphysical view as the most fundamental background or basis for his theoretical work. A striking example can be found in analytic philosophy. As is well known, the vast majority of analytic philosophers hold (most frequently implicitly) a purely materialistic and/or physicalistic view of the "world," taking "world" as synonymous with "being." But such a view is rarely considered explicitly and even more rarely explicitly treated and justified. It cannot be denied, however, that this view plays a tremendous, indeed a decisive role in the framing and delimiting a limine the kinds of solutions those philosophers offer for specific problems. The importance of developing an explicit, rational, and well-argued grand metaphysics could not be exaggerated.

As for the proper role of special, general, and grand metaphysics in relation to other academic disciplines, including the natural sciences, the answer can be very short. Two aspects should be addressed. First, what was said about the role of metaphysics in relation to the other areas of philosophy should be analogously applied to its relation to non-philosophical areas, especially the natural sciences. Of particular importance is the development of metaphysics in order to inhibit unfounded extrapolations and inappropriate uses of natural-scientific results by many philosophers, and even by scientists and other authors of books presenting those results to the general public. Second, special metaphysics should be extremely careful to avoid entering the proper spheres of other academic disciplines, most especially the natural sciences. This is a point of highest importance, because it is all too evident that very often there have been and still are conflicts between metaphysical and natural-scientific views.

What do you consider to be the proper method for metaphysics?
The structural-systematic philosophy does not recognize or develop a special method for metaphysics, i.e., for the systematics of structure, world-systematics, and comprehensive systematics. Instead, it develops a *philosophical method* on the basis of the concept of theoretical framework. The method consists in working out and putting to work all the pieces or elements that constitute the suitable theoretical framework and in applying it to a determinate area. This determinate area is the subject matter of the philosophical theory envisaged. It presents itself initially as a collection of area-related *data*. The concept *datum/data* is not taken in the sense of sense data or the like; instead, it has the technical meaning of “given information” already linguistically articulated. In other words, data are sentences that express propositions in such a way that they appear initially as being not foundationally understood truths, but only *truth candidates*. Philosophical theorizing consists in reinterpreting those data as (fundamental) structures, by which process the data reinterpreted as structures are sufficiently determinate to be classifiable as truths and falsehoods.

Philosophical data can mostly clearly and understandably be presented in conjunction with questions. Because every question presupposes (or includes) a declarative sentence, the datum is what this sentence expresses. Examples for so understood philosophical questions (and, consequently, data) are: What is an individual (in the “robust” sense, for instance, of a living being, a human person)? What is a domain of individual beings? What are the differences between and connections among different domains of beings? What is the connection among all domains of beings, i.e., the world? Such questions call for (or presuppose) the data for world-systematics or special metaphysics. But a further grand question—what is being itself or as such and as a whole?—calls for (or presupposes) the grand datum, i.e., the datum that is the subject matter of comprehensive systematics or grand metaphysics.

Questions and declarative sentences presuppose theoretical frameworks, which contain among other things the concepts they rely upon. The ensuing task for metaphysics (in all three senses) is to articulate the right questions, assemble the relevant data, and theorize about them in the indicated manner. The method for doing that, the philosophical method, is a complex one, consisting of four stages. Starting with single theories about single and restricted domains of data, the guiding idea behind the four-stage
method is simple and can be described as follows. With respect to the data – be they individual phenomena or events, entire domains, or even the comprehensive datum, i.e., the unrestricted universe of discourse as a whole – the task of theorization is the following: first, the theoretician must seek structures for the data (and thus structures of the data), thereby both acquiring the material for theorization and formulating initial or informal theories. Next, these informal or elementary theories must be put into the strictly theoretical form; that is, theories in the genuine or strict sense are to be formulated. Third, the thus-presented individual theories must be brought into systematic form, which requires the development of a network of theories. Fourth and finally, it must be determined whether the individual theories and the theoretical network within which they are integrated, thus the comprehensive theory, are theoretically adequate, i.e., whether they satisfy the criteria for theoricity, which include, most importantly, that of truth.

In normal philosophical practice, these steps are scarcely ever even recognized, much less taken in this order. The second and third steps or stages are usually wholly ignored. Typically, only incidental aspects of the first and fourth stages are applied, and the fourth stage is usually taken to involve “justification” of an only vaguely determinate sort. More ambitious philosophical presentations ignore only the second step. In such cases, the informal or minimal theories that result from the application of the first stage of the method are directly integrated into a network-theory that is itself only informally articulated. (Worth noting is that the philosophical four-stage method just delineated is an idealized method; it can be conceived of as a kind of “regulative method”, in analogy to Kant’s “regulative idea.”)

What do you consider to be the most neglected topics in contemporary metaphysics, and what direction would you like metaphysics to take in the future?

The answer to this question is already contained in the answers to the preceding four questions, so here only three points need be summarily reiterated. First, among the most neglected topics today is that raised by the question whether traditional analytic semantics and ontology and the formal tools hitherto used to clarify them require profound revision. I have tried to show that this question must be answered in the affirmative. Second, even more radically neglected has been and still is to a vast extent the
need for philosophical theorization of the unrestricted universe of discourse—or, differently stated, for a philosophical theory of everything, not only in the sense of a theory of all beings (Seiende, entia), but also—and most importantly—in that of a theory of being as such and as a whole, which can be called grand metaphysics. Third, given the neglect of these two topics, the direction I would like metaphysics (in all three senses, but especially in the sense of grand metaphysics) to pursue in the future is to take seriously the fact of these neglects and to try to find ways to decisively remedy them.