Chapter 10 – Analytic Phenomenology: A Metaphysical Manifesto

10.1 The state of contemporary metaphysics

There is a concern that metaphysics hasn’t got anywhere. We’ve been doing it for thousands of years and still don’t seem to have reached conclusive answers on any of the big questions. For many the track record of metaphysics is especially troubling in relation to that of the physical sciences, which are able to boast a history of continual progress and a substantial body of broadly agreed information to teach to their undergraduates. Perhaps because of such comparisons the public no longer takes metaphysics seriously; most don’t even know what it is.

We have seen throughout the book (particularly chapters 1 and 6) that this comparison to the physical sciences is misguided. Physics has been so successful precisely because, from Galileo onwards, it stopped trying to tell us what matter is and just focused on telling us what it does. Detailed information about the causal structure of the natural world has produced extraordinary technology. But physics has revealed to us nothing about the concrete categorical nature of the stuff that has that causal structure.

Even dropping allegedly unfavourable comparisons to physics, the lack of progress in metaphysics can still seem worrying. How can those with faith in metaphysics explain this? One thing to appreciate is that even though the physical sciences are not the same thing as metaphysics, they arguably provide a crucial source of data for metaphysics. We saw in the last chapter that whether or not emergentism is an option is a largely empirical question. And many believe that special relativity casts doubt on dynamical conceptions of time, to
take another example. If metaphysical knowledge is dependent on knowledge in the physical sciences, it could be argued that progress in metaphysics was impossible until the physical sciences had reached a fairly developed state. This could explain the lack of progress from the pre-Socratics to the eighteenth century.

We can also note that in the eighteenth century there emerged an extremely influential line of thought through Hume and Kant according to which metaphysics as we traditionally understand it is impossible. In the final paragraph of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume urges us to ‘commit to the flames’ all attempts to settle matters of fact a priori.¹ Picking up the baton from Hume, Kant encouraged philosophers to give up on attempts to uncover the world as it is in and of itself, and to confine their focus to the necessary structure of experience. And of course when we reach the twentieth century we reach a high point of antipathy towards metaphysics in philosophy, with Wittgenstein and the logical positivists in their different ways dismissing metaphysical questions as not only impossible to answer but meaningless. Taking all this into account, it becomes far from clear that metaphysics has been given enough of a go.

Recent history has been interesting. From the mid-nineteen seventies we start to see, cautious at first, the return of attempts in analytic philosophy to do something like traditional metaphysics. And in the twenty first century we find our most respected metaphysicians rediscovering traditional metaphysical notions of *essence*, *fundamentality*, the distinction between those concepts that do and those concepts that don’t *carve nature at the joints*, and even the *Principle of Sufficient Reason*.² In this increasingly traditional

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¹ Hume 1748/2000.
² This rediscovery of traditional metaphysical notions arguably begins with Lewis’s 1983 defence of the idea that a certain subset of properties – the ‘natural’ or ‘sparse’ properties – are metaphysically privileged. Sider extends the basic Lewisian idea of metaphysical privilege from properties to other metaphysical categories,
framework extremely intelligent women and men have put their minds to serious, sustained, scientifically informed, rigorous attempts to evaluate the relative worth of various metaphysical hypotheses.

How is the inquiry conducted? Perhaps the biggest influence on the practice of contemporary analytic metaphysics is David Lewis. Lewis holds that metaphysics must begin with common sense. Descartes tried to ground all metaphysics in that which cannot be doubted. It is universally acknowledged that his project, for all its virtues, did not succeed. Perhaps one day philosophers will conclusively prove the existence of the external world or the reality of other minds, and thus provide us with firm foundations for metaphysics. But until that happens I am in sympathy with Lewis’s view that we must help ourselves to certain commonsense assumptions simply because we have no other choice:

'...it is pointless to build a theory, however nicely systematised, that it would be unreasonable to believe. And a theory cannot earn credence just by its unity and economy. What credence it cannot earn, it must inherit. It is far beyond our power to weave a brand new fabric of adequate theory ex nihilo, so we must perforce conserve the one we've got [by which Lewis means the theory that is implicit in common sense].

If this seems indulgent or unwarranted, we can note that natural science seems to be in the same boat. Neither metaphysics, nor science, nor daily living, can get off the ground without

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3 Lewis 1986: 134.
making a whole host of commitments that are extremely difficult to justify, either empirically or by a priori argument:

- All things being equal, theories with greater simplicity are more likely to be true.
- Systematic regularities that have obtained in the past will continue to obtain in the future.
- There are no contradictory states of affairs.
- Solipsism is false.
- Other people have minds.

As John Locke put it:

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He that in the ordinary affairs of life, would admit of nothing but
direct plain demonstration, would be sure of nothing in this world
but of perishing quickly.⁴
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The need to begin where we are, epistemically speaking, is made vivid with an analogy due to Otto Neurath, in which knowledge is compared to a boat that must be repaired at sea.⁵

We can improve the ship we have, attending to rotting planks one by one, but we cannot – as Descartes desired – dive off and try to build a new ship from scratch. We would drown before we had time to nail two planks together.

Crucially, starting with common sense doesn’t meaning ending with common sense. Lewis thinks that if upon reflection the theory implicit in common sense can be improved upon, in terms of the theoretical virtues we appeal to in natural science – elegance, parsimony and

⁴ Locke 1689/2008, Book IV, chapter X1, section 10.
simplicity – then we are entitled to revise our pre-theoretical view of reality. But we have to start from common sense, if only we don’t have anything better:

It's not that the folk know in their blood what the highfalutin' philosophers may forget. And it's not that common sense speaks with the voice of some infallible faculty of 'intuition'. It's just that theoretical conservatism is the only sensible policy of theorists of limited powers, who are duly modest about what they could accomplish after a fresh start.\(^6\)

The Lewisian method, then, can be summed up with the following imperative:

_The Lewisian Method – Start with the theory implicit in common sense, and move beyond it by appeal to theoretical virtues._

A few decades of hard work with this method, or slight variations on it, has not led to consensus among the practitioners of metaphysics, and the public outside of academia is still almost completely unaware that any of it’s going on. Perhaps because of this there has also been in the last decade a growing interest in philosophical reflection on the foundations of metaphysics, in ‘metametaphysics’ as it has become known; and once again the suspicion that metaphysics is a confused activity has resurfaced.\(^7\) Despite the universal rejection of positivism there has been renewed defence of the claim that metaphysical discussions are in some sense defective, and of the Carnapian position that central debates in contemporary

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\(^6\) Lewis 1986: 134.
\(^7\) See Chalmers, Manley & Wasserman 2009 for a number of essays that articulate and explore this suspicion.
metaphysics concerning the nature of material objects are merely verbal.\textsuperscript{8} Eli Hirsch is one of the leading proponents of this ‘neo-Carnapian’ movement:

I know someone, whom I’ll call A, who claimed that a standard drinking glass is a cup. ‘Just as a cat is a kind of animal,’ she said, ‘a glass is a kind of cup.’ Everyone else whom I’ve asked about this agrees with me that a glass is not a cup. Clearly this debate is, in some sense, merely about language.\textsuperscript{9}

We can imagine a possible language, very similar to English, in which the word ‘cup’ is used in such a way that glasses count as a kind of cup. We can also imagine a language in which the word ‘cup’ is used in such a way that glasses are not a kind of cup. The only conceivable debate here is which of these possible languages is English. A is confused not about fundamental reality but about what the word ‘cup’ means.

Now consider one of the central debates in contemporary metaphysics:

\textbf{The Composition Debate}

\textbf{The question}

When do fundamental particles compose composite objects?

\textbf{The sides}

- \textit{Compositional nihilism} – Particles never compose composite entities. There are no such things as tables, only particles ‘arranged table-wise’; no such things as persons, only particles arranged ‘person-wise’, etc.

- \textit{Compositional universalism} – For any set of particles, the members of that set – no matter how disparate and seemingly unrelated – compose an object. Universalists

\textsuperscript{8} Carnap 1950.
\textsuperscript{9} Hirsch 2005: 69.
believe not only in ‘common sense’ composite objects, such as table, rocks and planets, but also in ‘crazy’ composite objects, such as the object composed of Bill Clinton’s nose, George Bush’s left ear and the planet Venus.

- **Restricted composition** – Only in certain quite specific circumstances do particles compose a composite object. Peter van Inwagan, for example, famously defends the view that particles compose only when they form a life. So organisms exist, but tables, rocks and planets do not.

Hirsch argues that the above debate, like that over whether glasses are cups, is a merely verbal dispute, this time brought about by different possible meanings of terms pertaining to existence. We can imagine a possible language, very similar to English, in which the word ‘existence’ is used in such a way that only particles ‘exist’, or in such a way that only particles and organisms ‘exist’. We can also imagine a possible language in which the verb to be is used in such a way that the sentence ‘There is an object composed of Clinton’s ear, Bush’s nose and the Planet Venus’ is true. The only possible disagreement is which if any of these imagined languages are English. Hirsch’s answer is that none of them are; if we use existence terms in the way they are used in English, then it’s true that there ‘are’ tables, rocks and planets, and false that there ‘is’ an object composed of Clinton’s nose, Bush’s left ear and Venus.

Karen Bennett argues that the composition debate, and other central debates in metaphysics, are problematic for a different reason: there’s no way of working out which side is correct. Following Lewis a contemporary metaphysician tries to sell her theory at the ‘metaphysical marketplace’ by boasting of its theoretical virtues of elegance, parsimony.

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10 Bennett 2009.
and simplicity. Compositional nihilists, for instance, argue that their view is the most parsimonious: the only things that exist are particles. However, compositional nihilists don’t want to reject common sense talk as though there were composite objects. People who don’t believe in witches don’t talk about them as though they exist, but nihilists are happy to carry on talking about composite objects as though they exist; as Bennett puts it nihilists never say ‘there are no toasters; revise your breakfast plans.’\(^{11}\) Thus, compositional nihilism involves an elaborate semantic account of how the sentence ‘There’s a toaster in kitchen if you’re feeling hungry’ is correctly assertable whilst the sentence ‘There’s a toaster on the moon’ is not, even though neither is strictly speaking true.

Bennett argues that the complexity involved in the nihilist’s semantic theory perfectly cancels out the gains in parsimony involved in the nihilist’s world view. The universalist has a much more simple and elegant semantic theory than the nihilist: the universalist can hold that the sentence ‘There’s a toaster in the kitchen’ is true/correctly assertable just in case there’s a toaster in the kitchen. But this gain in semantic simplicity is perfectly cancelled out by the lack of economy relative to nihilism: the universalist believes in a lot more stuff than the nihilist. Thus we have a perfect tie between the two views, with no way of deciding which is to be preferred.

Hirsch and Bennett have quite different views. Hirsch thinks that the dispute between the different sides of compositional debate is merely verbal. Bennett thinks that it is a genuine dispute concerning the nature of reality; just not one it’s possible to resolve. But both agree that we have reached a stage in which these debates cannot be moved on. As Hirsch says:

\(^{11}\) Bennett 2009: 58.
Of course ontologists do occasionally retract their positions, but, as Lewis remarks, a stage seems eventually to be reached in ontology when ‘all is said and done,’ when ‘all the tricky arguments and distinctions and counterexamples have been discovered,’ so that each position has achieved a state of ‘equilibrium’. I’m assuming that in the ontological disputes under discussion the ‘all is said and done’ stage has been reached.\(^\text{12}\)

It is central to Hirsch’s argument that this stage has been reached with respect to the debates he holds are merely verbal. Without going into all the details of how he argues for his position, we can appreciate that if there is no possible evidence (either empirical or from a priori reflection) that would cause proponents of either side of the composition debate to retract their view, then it is plausible that there is no fact of the matter as to which position is correct. It makes the composition debate look like the debate over whether glasses are cups; presumably nothing we could learn about the nature of glasses would settle this matter. Contrast this with the case of a dispute in empirical science in which there is some possible evidence that would cause one of the sides to retract their view.

Thus, it is a crucial premise for Hirsch that the ‘all is said and done’ stage has been reached with respect to the central debates in metaphysics on the nature of material objects. In the case of Bennett, it is the conclusion of her argument, rather than a premise of her argument, that the ‘all is said and done’ stage has been reached in many central debates. The debate is substantive, but there’s just no way of working out which side is right.

Perhaps Bennett is right that nothing more can be said on these debates if we have available only the tools which contemporary metaphysicians make use of: roughly theoretical virtues

\(^\text{12}\) Hirsch 2005: 80-1.
and common sense. Certainly no consensus to speak of has yet been reached. And perhaps Hirsch is right that if the proponents on all sides of the composition debate have all relevant evidence before them and are still disagreeing, then we have good reason to think that these central debates are merely verbal. But I want to suggest that things look very, very different once we take on board a couple of the conclusions we have reached throughout this book. I want to suggest a way forward.

10.2 A way forward for metaphysics

Suppose Jack and Jill know everything there is to know about the material constitution of the glass in front of them, and they still disagree about whether or not it is a cup. It is clear that there is no serious dispute here.

Now suppose Jack and Jill know everything there is to know about the nature of each kind of micro-level material entity in a given table-shaped region of space, and how tokens of those kinds are arranged and related to each other; and suppose that everything that exists in that table-shaped region is grounded in facts concerning those micro-level material entities and their relationships. Let us further imagine that Jack and Jill are metaphysicians who disagree about whether or not there is a table in that table-shaped region of space.

As in the cup and glass case, it is hard to take seriously the idea that there could be a substantive disagreement here. After all, ex hypothesi both Jack and Jill have all the evidence that could possibly be relevant to determining whether or not there is a table: if there is a table it is grounded in facts about particles, and Jack and Jill have a complete
understanding of all the particle-facts. What else could they be fighting over other than how to describe the case?¹³

However, the situation as described above does not match the real situation. Even if Jack and Jill are well-versed in what our best physics has to tell us about the nature of fundamental material entities, indeed even if they are well-versed in the completed physics of the future, there is still a massively significant aspect of the nature of fields and particles of which they are ignorant: their deep nature. Physics tell us about the causal structure of material entities, but leaves us completely in the dark regarding the concrete categorical nature that underlies that structure. It is crucial to Hirsch’s case that all relevant evidence is in. But all relevant evidence is not in: we are ignorant of the deep nature of matter.

Indeed it is extremely plausible that knowledge of the deep nature of matter would settle the composition debate as decisively as Google can settle a debate over the currency in Peru. It could turn out that the deep nature of matter is consciousness-involving, and that for any set of particles the members of that set form a subject of experience; hence there is a subject of experience composed of Clinton’s nose, Bush’s left ear and the planet Venus. Learning this would decisively settle matters in favour of the universalist. Or it could turn out that, when viewed in terms of its deep nature, only particles and organisms form unities, such that no one viewing reality in terms of its deep nature would be inclined to describe the world as containing tables. Whilst there is crucial evidence that cannot be

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¹³ Schaffer (forthcoming) supposes that we need brute metaphysical principles to bridge the gap from the micro to the macro-level. However, in line with the grounding via analysis model outlined in chapter 2, I am inclined to think that if one grasps the nature of entities at both levels, then one can move a priori from micro to the macro (assuming there is a relation of constitutive grounding from the former to the latter). I take the composition question to be substantive, but only because of our ignorance of the deep nature of matter.
accessed by those involved in the compositions debate, Hirsch’s case that the debate is merely verbal collapses.

This still leaves Bennett’s view that the debate, although substantive, cannot be settled. But Bennett, like the vast majority of contemporary metaphysicians, is trying to do metaphysics without a distinctive source of data beyond common sense and third-person observation. Looking at the current state of contemporary metaphysics, it is increasingly likely that these meagre tools are unable to decisively settle any of the big questions they are being used to address. However, we learnt in chapter 5 that there is a source of evidence, distinct from third-person data and common sense, which can potentially be used in metaphysical enquiry: our direct access to the essence of our conscious states. Indeed, it seems to me that the best strategy available to opponents of compositional nihilism is to try to use this source of evidence to establish the following: facts concerning o-subjects are something over and above facts concerning the relationships between micro-level particles.

This crucial source of data is almost wholly neglected in contemporary metaphysics. In his recent defence of compositional nihilism, Theodore Sider spends less than a page considering what he calls ‘the Cartesian argument’ against nihilism, roughly that I know for certain that I exist and I am not plausibly a micro-level entity.\(^{14}\) He quickly dismisses this on the grounds that we have no good reason to deny that sentences about my existence as a conscious being are correctly assertable in virtue of certain micro-level facts. Perhaps if we deny Phenomenal Transparency, then there is indeed no good reason to think that the truth-conditions of o-phenomenal propositions could not be satisfied by micro-level facts. But once we embrace Phenomenal Transparency, this becomes a great deal more difficult to

\(^{14}\) Sider 2013.
make sense of, as we discovered in the discussion of the subject irreducibility problem in chapter 8.\textsuperscript{15}

To sum up the proposal:

- Acknowledging our ignorance of the deep nature of matter removes the Hirschian concern that central debates regarding the nature of material objects are merely verbal.
- Our introspective grasp of the nature of consciousness provides an underexploited source of data that has the potential to resolve the stand offs that concern Bennett.

The datum of consciousness is a valuable source of data with the potential to transform metaphysical debates. Recognition of this fact could, I believe, lead to a radically new approach to metaphysics. In the next section I will sketch an argument for presentism, as a case study to illustrate how this new methodology might work in practice.

10. 3 A phenomenological argument for presentism

Consider the following debate, which Hirsch also argues is merely verbal:

**The Persistence Debate**

**The question**

How do material objects persist through time?

**The sides**

\textsuperscript{15} The subject irreducibility problem in chapter 8 isn’t set up in terms of Sider’s framework, but it can be easily set up that way, as I show in Goff 2015a, 2016b.
- **Endurantism** – A material object persists through time in virtue of being wholly present at each time at which it exists. On this view material objects are extended in three-dimensions.

- **Perdurantism** – A material object persists through time in virtue of one temporal part of it being present at each time at which it exists. On this view material objects are extended in four-dimensions.

According to perdurantism the book in front of you is a four-dimensional spacetime worm, stretched out across time. What you are currently looking at is just one temporal slice of that worm. According to endurantism, what you have in front of you right now is the entire book, not just one slice of it. The whole book also existed a moment ago and will exist a moment hence.

David Lewis objected to endurantism on the grounds that it is unable to account for the fact that objects change intrinsic properties.\(^{16}\) Suppose you get extremely fed up with the nonsense being spouted in this book and decide to crush it into an unreadable ball. It seems to follow that a single copy of my book is both book-shaped (as it exists yesterday) and unreadable-ball-shaped (as it exists today). How is this possible?

According to Lewis there are only three possible solutions:

- **Presentism**: Only the present moment exists. The state of affairs of the book being book-shaped no longer exists; the book has no shape other than the one that it has in the present moment: unreadable-ball-shaped.

\(^{16}\) Lewis 1986: 202-4.
• **Perdurantism** (Lewis’s preferred view): Some temporal part of the spacetime worm book are book-shaped, and some temporal parts are unreadable-ball-shaped. This is no more contradictory than the fact that some of my parts are hand-shaped and some are foot-shaped.

• **Relationism** Shapes are in fact relationships material objects bear to times. Thus, the book bears the *being-book-shaped* relation to yesterday, and the *being-unreadable-ball-shaped* relation to today. The contradiction is removed, an object can consistently bear a single relation to one thing but not another, e.g. I can be on the left of Susan but not on the left of Jerry.

Lewis rejects the first and third options, and hence ends up with perdurantism by a process of elimination. His reasons for rejecting presentism are extremely weak. Lewis argues (i) that the presentist rejects persistence altogether, and (ii) that presentism is absurd as ‘No man, unless it be at the moment of his execution, believes that he has no future; still less does anyone believe that he has no past.’ But although presentists deny the reality of the past, all sensible presentists will accept that there are past truths — expressed by sentences prefixed by the sentential operator ‘It was the case that...’ — and probable future truths — expressed using the sentential operator ‘Probably it will be the case that...’ If there are truths about the past then we can account for persistence in terms of them: I persist through time in virtue of the fact that it was the case that I existed at prior times. And although most of us believe we have a future, for the presentist all this means is that we believe that it probably will be the case that we will exist at such and such future times.

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17 Lewis 1986: 204
18 Many philosophers think it is a deep difficulty for presentism how to account for past truths without the reality of the past. I argue in Goff 2010b that this a pseudo-problem. The charge that presentism is inconsistent with special relativity is an important one. Some (Craig 2001) defend a ‘neo-Lorenzian’ reinterpretation of
What about the third option? Lewis declares that it is absurd to think that shape is a relation. It is just evident that an object’s shape is an intrinsic feature of it rather than a relationship the object bears to things outside of itself.

Many have been unmoved by Lewis’s conviction that shape is an intrinsic property. Plausibly shape *according to our folk concept of it* is an intrinsic property. But why should our folk concept not be revised in the light of scientific or metaphysical discoveries, just as our folk concept of solidity arguably has been? This reveals what a thin source of data common sense is. For almost all of our folk concepts, there seem no good grounds for holding them to be unrevisable. And once we are allowed to revise them, they can be moulded to fit almost any metaphysical theory. The requirement that a theory accommodate freedom, value, shape, solidity according to our exact folk conception of them would be very demanding; the requirement that a theory accommodate some watered down version of freedom, value, etc., accounting for a limited subset of our folk platitudes about these things, is not.

As luck would have it there is one kind of folk concept which we know for certain is satisfied: direct phenomenal concepts. Not only that, but these concepts are transparent, revealing the complete essence of the properties they denote. If we have the intuition – as many do – that phenomenal qualities are intrinsic, then this is an intuition that we are entitled to take

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special relativity; Balashov & Janssen (2003) present a powerful case against such interpretations. Even if special relativity considered in isolation supports the relativity of simultaneity, it may be that quantum mechanics requires an absolute frame of reference (see Maudlin 1994 for extended discussion). Ultimately empirical considerations should have more force in this matter than the philosophical considerations pertaining to the need to preserve our common sense conception of time and the persistence of subjects over extended periods of time. However, whilst we patiently wait for the unification of general relativity and quantum mechanics, which may decide the matter, it is arguably rational to go with the philosophical considerations.
very seriously indeed. The strength of the Lewisian argument against relationism would be vastly improved upon if it were built on a deep intuition about the nature of consciousness.

Even when our intuitions about the nature of consciousness don’t directly undermine a given metaphysical hypothesis, they can sometimes do so by working hand in hand with common sense. I am inclined to think that our understanding of consciousness, in conjunction with a little commonsense, leads to a fairly strong argument against perdurantism, as I will now explain.

The one thing I know with certainty to exist – my conscious mind – is currently having an experience of a table with a laptop on it, beyond that a window, traffic outside, and a couple arguing in Hungarian in the next apartment. I am certainly not experiencing events of my childhood or of my life at the age of sixty four. But according to perdurantism, I am a four-dimensional spacetime worm, stretched out over (I hope!) seventy or so years of time. That Goff-like spacetime worm is certainly not having the experience I have just been describing; if it is conscious at all it is having some kind of weird consciousness involving all of the experiences of my life. But that is not my consciousness; it is not the consciousness of that thing which right now I know with certainty to exist.

Spacetime worms that perdure for more than a few seconds can be said to ‘have’ o-conscious states in the derivative sense of having temporal parts that have o-conscious states. But they don’t directly instantiate o-conscious states, in the sense that you and I directly instantiate o-conscious states; there is nothing that it’s like to be a spacetime worm (or if there is, it’s not what it’s like to be an o-subject). Thus, for the perdurantist, spacetime worms persist through time but are not o-subjects, whilst brief temporal parts of spacetime worms are o-subjects but persist only through very brief periods of time. There is nothing in
the perdurantist world-view that both persists through longish periods of time and is an o-
subject

In a recent article Josh Parsons has drawn attention to this point, but offers a solution: I am
not a spacetime worm, rather I am a temporal part of a spacetime worm. The thing which
has my conscious experience, the thing I know with certainty to exist, is just one tiny slice of
the Goff-like spacetime worm stretched over seventy years of time. This is a coherent view,
and it might be true. But I hope to God it isn’t. Because on the perdurantist view such
temporal parts do not exist for very long at all. Human-like spacetime worms are stretched
through fairly long periods of time; enveloping many temporal parts. But the temporal parts
that could plausibly thought to instantiate o-conscious states last no more than a couple of
seconds each.

Thus, if Parsons is right, then my conscious mind, that thing I know with certainty to exist,
won’t be around in a couple of second’s time. It will be replaced by some other conscious
mind, which will be very similar to it, which will share its memories, but which won’t be me:
the thinking, feeling thing I know with certainty to exist right now. This is precisely the
content of the fear of imminent death: the fear that I won’t exist in the near future. If
perdurantism is true, then there is a very real sense in which I am dying every second. We
may one day have overwhelming empirical reason to believe such a picture of the world,
but our humanity demands that we not lose touch with the fact that it is a radically sceptical
scenario, different in degree but not in kind to solipsism or the hypothesis that I am a brain
in a vat.

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19 Parsons 2015.
We now have the basic components of a phenomenological argument for presentism:

**A phenomenological argument for presentism**

*Premise 1* – Either presentism, relationism or four-dimensionalism is true (If Lewis is right that these are the only ways of accounting for the fact that objects change their intrinsic properties).

*Premise 2* – Relationism is false (Supported by intuitions that consciousness is intrinsic rather than relational).

*Premise 3* – Perdurantism is false (Supported by our introspective knowledge of what it’s like to be an o-subject, in conjunction with a common sense commitment to the longevity of o-subjects).

*Conclusion* – Therefore, presentism is true.

I do not take myself to have given anything like an adequate defence of this argument. I merely wanted to illustrate that the datum of consciousness has potential applications in metaphysics beyond dealing with the mind-body problem.

In the final section I will outline a methodology that generalises this consciousness-based approach to metaphysics.

### 10.4 Analytic phenomenology

The Lewisian method outlined above starts metaphysical enquiry with only the data of common sense. This is to ignore a powerful source of data: carefully considered intuitions concerning phenomenal consciousness. It is justified to take carefully considered armchair intuitions as a guide to what is required from reality for our transparent concepts to be satisfied. In the case of direct phenomenal concepts, we have a class of concepts that are not only transparent, but are such that we know with an extremely high level of justification

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20 There is a huge literature on Lewis’s argument, see Haslanger 2003 for an excellent starting point.
that they are satisfied. If armchair intuitions give us reason to think that reality must be such and such a way if there is phenomenal consciousness, then those armchair intuitions are reason to believe that reality really is that way. Hence, in the possibly unique case of reflection on phenomenal consciousness, armchair intuitions can get us all the way to reality.

I propose the following small but potentially revolutionary modification to the Lewisian method, as the basis of an approach that combines the rigour and resources of analytic metaphysics, with a commitment to Phenomenal Transparency:

*Analytic Phenomenology* – Start with common sense, empirical data and carefully considered intuitions concerning the nature of phenomenal consciousness, and move on by appeal to theoretical virtue.

This does not give us an infallible method. No doubt compositional nihilists have responses to the subject irreducibility problem. Perhaps some will have a way of defusing the deep intuition that phenomenal qualities are intrinsic. And even if we could reach agreement on all the a priori intuitions about consciousness, we would still have to rely on common sense in order to get beyond solipsism. There is no guarantee that metaphysicians working in a framework that starts from Phenomenal Transparency would reach convergence in their views.

On the other hand, we have no reason to think they wouldn’t. If the kind of serious, sustained, rigorous thought that has taken place in contemporary metaphysics in the last forty years was done *with an agreed source of data* (beyond common sense) who knows what could be achieved. Metaphysicians have spent too long sitting by a microscope trying to work out the relative merits of various theories or the microscopic world, without
actually *having a look in the microscope*. In this situation we may very well have reached Lewis’s ‘all is said and done stage’ whilst serious disagreement remains. It does not follow that serious disagreement will persist when we start looking through the microscope.

We can think of the history of metaphysics thus far as divided into two epochs. In the pre-Galilean epoch, lasting up to the sixteenth century, we tried to formulate a complete theory of the world all at once, without distinguishing the project of mapping the world’s causal structure from the broader project. In the Galilean epoch which followed, we distinguished the more limited project of mapping causal structure and focused great resources on it.

In a sense, the second epoch went much better than the first, yielding a clear line of progress and stable consensus on big issues. In fact, as discussed in chapter 1, the Galilean project has gone so well that we have forgotten that it was only ever intended to be a partial description of reality. The effect of technology on one’s metaphysics is powerful. We can’t help feeling an intense need to put all of our metaphysical faith in the scientific method that has produced it. Everything else seems too speculative and imprecise in comparison. This powerful influence has led to what will be looked back on as the deepest perversion in metaphysical thought: the conviction that the qualitative consciousness is nothing over and above causal structure.

It will be hard to move on from this, to a ‘post-Galilean epoch’. But if we ever do, there is the potential for a radically new approach to metaphysics, one not available until recent history. The consciousness-based approach of Analytic Phenomenology takes seriously two distinct sources of data:

- The findings of mature physical science concerning the causal structure of the material world.
The direct first-person access each of us has to the nature of consciousness.

Aside from the extra source of data, Analytic Phenomenology could be indistinguishable from the familiar Lewisian approach. Rival hypotheses can evaluated in terms of (i) fit with the data, (ii) intrinsic theoretical virtues. As in science, a minimal amount of pre-theoretical common sense must also be respected; interpersonal verification of empirical data requires at the very least that each of us make the anti-skeptical assumption that there are other minds. But the possession of a distinctive source of metaphysical data renders the Analytic Phenomenologist less reliant than the Lewisian on common sense, and correspondingly more open to revising ordinary thought for the sake of theoretical virtue.

Never in the history of human thought have three elements been in place: (i) mature natural science, (ii) serious systematic metaphysics, (iii) broad agreement among the practitioners of metaphysics that consciousness must be taken seriously (the kind of seriousness expressed by the Consciousness Constraint articulated in chapter 1).21 If one day each of these comes to pass we could finally begin the serious, interdisciplinary task of formulating the most simple, elegant theory that is consistent both with the findings of natural science and with the evident reality of consciousness. A couple of hundred years of serious engagement with this project would result in the best guess at the nature of reality of which human beings are capable. I see no reason why it should not be possible to achieve consensus on central matters.

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21 Whether or not the 17th century counts as a time when these three elements were in place depends on how ‘mature’ natural science has to be in order to be helpful to metaphysics. Certainly, these elements haven’t been present for a long time.
People worry that metaphysics hasn’t got anywhere. But true post-Galilean metaphysics hasn’t yet begun. It might not work, but it’s worth a try.²²

²² The work of Barry Dainton is an example of the methodology I am trying to get at. A fine example of this is Dainton 2011b, in which he argues that the reality of time consciousness rules out certain metaphysical theories of time.