Reply to Trenton Merricks*

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Trenton Merricks’s illuminating paper begins by criticizing the first sentence of my book: “Metaphysics, at bottom, is about the fundamental structure of reality” (p. 1). Metaphysics isn’t about any single thing “at bottom”, Merricks says, and anyway, plenty of it isn’t about structure. He’s largely right; I got a little carried away with my rhetoric. But I do think that fundamentality is more central to metaphysics than Merricks allows.

Questions about which concepts are fundamental are indeed just one part of metaphysics. But there are also questions that use fundamental concepts, which I also meant to count as being “about the fundamental structure of reality”.\(^1\) So if quantifiers carve at the joints, for instance, then ontological questions are about “the fundamental structure of reality” (see, e.g., p. viii).

Merricks might argue that ontological questions would be part of metaphysics even if quantifiers didn’t carve at the joints. Strictly speaking he’s right: they would be part of philosophy, and not part of epistemology, ethics, or any other branch. But they would be quite unlike metaphysics as traditionally conceived. For they arguably should then be addressed as Eli Hirsch (2011) thinks they should: by doing conceptual analysis. Hirsch and others with similar visions of how we ought to do ontology write Metaphysics on their CV’s, but perhaps they ought to append asterisks.

Discussions of ontology, essence, properties, causation, and so forth have normally presupposed that fundamental reality has something like ontological, essential, property-theoretic, and causal aspects. If that presupposition is false, and if these matters are, as a result, mere projections of our conceptual scheme (in the sense I develop in section 4.4), we could continue to agonize, perhaps in a Hirschian, Strawsonian, or Knobian spirit, over whether, for instance, origins

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\(^1\)Not all such questions are metaphysical—think of physics.
Fundamentality is also the central concern when metaphysicians tackle Frank Jackson’s (1998) “location problem”: *fitting things into* a given conception of fundamental reality. David Lewis spent many of his metaphysical hours showing how laws of nature, causation, counterfactuals, chance, and various other phenomena could be fit into a “Humean” world consisting of nothing but local qualities instantiated at points of spacetime (1986, pp. ix–xvii). Although this project was in a sense not an investigation of fundamental reality since laws, causation, and the rest were by Lewis’s lights nonfundamental, the project was animated by a concern about fundamentality since its point was to defend the underlying Humean metaphysics.

Does it matter what counts as metaphysics? Merricks says:

Sider thinks that a great deal hangs on the answer. For he thinks that metaphysics totters if its borders are arbitrary or result from highly disjunctive criteria. Thus he says:

The status of metaphysics itself hangs on [holding that fundamentality is fundamental]. In their loftiest moments, metaphysicians think of themselves as engaged in a profoundly important and foundational intellectual enterprise. But if fundamentality is highly disjunctive, the field of metaphysics itself—which is delineated by its focus on fundamental questions—would be an arbitrarily demarcated one.

I reply that even if metaphysics turned out to be a hodgepodge, it could still be profoundly important. Metaphysics would be important just so long as (enough of) the topics in the hodgepodge were themselves important.

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Kit Fine is, in a way, a fascinating exception. Throughout his career he has advocated a highly “metaphysical” world-view, with a rich structure of persistence, essence, dependence, and so forth; and yet in conversation he says that his writing is not meant to address what holds “in reality” (in the sense of his 2001). For instance, though he has famously defended three-dimensionalism (2006), he says that this claim concerns merely what is true; for all he is concerned, he says, ultimate reality may be four-dimensional. His attitude could be reconciled with mine if facts about ground (see again Fine (2001)) held in reality, for then investigation into the unreal matters of persistence, essence, and the rest would simultaneously be investigation into the real matter of ground; but as I understand it, he does not think that facts about ground hold in reality.

Consider also free will. The traditional question was whether humans are part of the natural causal order. Although part of the literature remains focused on that question, another part takes for granted that humans are part of the natural causal order, and focuses instead on the nature of human freedom thus construed. This latter part seems more distant from the center of metaphysics, and indeed is largely written by those with Value Theory on their CV’s.
I agree that if fundamentality isn’t fundamental, the resulting arbitrariness of the borders of metaphysics wouldn’t diminish the importance of all particular metaphysical questions. But it would diminish the importance of some of them: namely, those questions about fundamentality, such as “what exists in the fundamental sense?”, “what are the fundamental properties?”, and “is modality fundamental?”.

Merricks thinks that my misguided fixation on fundamentality leads me to misread David Armstrong (1997) and other defenders of truthmaking as claiming that an inventory of truthmakers is a complete description of fundamental reality. There may be some truth to this, but I do want to stick up a bit for this “reading of the texts”. First, Lewis in effect read Armstrong in this way:

When I first read [Armstrong’s demand for truthmakers], the best explanation I could find was that Armstrong demanded that we do away with unanalysed predication. That seemed strange...[because all theories require unanalysed predication.] So what is really going on? I suggest that Armstrong has an unfamiliar notion of analysis. Analysis is not, primarily, a quest for definitions. Rather, it is a quest for truth-makers. (1992, pp. 202–3)

Lewis speaks here of analysis, but “what is the analysis of such-and-such?” played for Lewis much the same role as is played in more recent discussions by “what fundamental underlies such-and-such?”. Second, truthmaking plays the same regulative role in Armstrong’s philosophy as fundamentality does for others. Armstrong counts the labor of “metaphysical explanation” as being complete when and only when truthmakers are given: phenomenalists who supply no truthmakers for counterfactuals about experience are criticized (Armstrong, 1989), and he himself stops his discussion of modality when he has given truthmakers (Armstrong, 1997, section 10.1).

A second set of Merricks’s criticisms involve my theses of “Purity” and “Completeness”. For present purposes, take Purity to be the claim that fundamental facts involve only fundamental concepts, and Completeness to be the claim that nonfundamental facts hold in virtue of fundamental facts. Together they imply that “impure” facts hold in virtue of “pure” ones, where a fact is pure iff it involves only fundamental concepts. (A fundamental concept, in turn, is one that carves at the joints.) To illustrate, these theses together imply that the impure fact that there are cities must hold in virtue of some pure

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4In Lewis that regulative role is played by “Truth supervenes on being”.

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fact—perhaps the fact that there are Cs, where C is a complex predicate that is a “metaphysical definition” of ‘city’—involving, let us suppose, the subatomic properties and relations of the microphysical parts of its instances.\(^5\)

Merricks puts forward a problem for the conjunction of Purity and Completeness, and then argues against various attempts I might make to solve it. Although there is much of interest in his argument, I think it takes a wrong turn at the very beginning. The alleged problem is that I cannot find a pure fact in virtue of which the following nonfundamental fact holds, where a “fundamental city”, as Merricks initially defines the phrase anyway, is something that is both a city and also a fundamental entity\(^6\):

\[
\text{NFC: There are no fundamental cities}
\]

Here is Merricks's first statement of the problem, followed by what I take to be the wrong turn:

It is true that there are no fundamental cities. But I shall argue that Sider cannot reconcile this truth with both Purity and Completeness. For starters, Sider cannot accommodate Purity and Completeness by saying that that there are no fundamental cities is true in virtue of its being true that there are no Cs that are fundamental.

Why not? This is exactly what I do want to say. Merricks continues:

This is because fundamental cities are not supposed to be Cs of any sort, and so they are not supposed to be Cs that are fundamental, and so the non-existence of fundamental Cs is irrelevant to whether there are fundamental cities.

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\(^5\) In fact I suspect that a better metaphysical definition would be a role-theoretic one; see my reply to Schaffer in this symposium.

\(^6\) In what follows I'll pretend that “fundamental entity” is a fundamental concept. In fact, it is important to me to avoid that phrase. First, the phrase suggests a general metaphysics of fundamentality according to which fundamentality attaches, in the first instance, to individuals, whereas my own view is that, roughly speaking, it is concepts, such as existence, charge, grue, and so forth, rather than individuals such as electrons, cities, and persons, which are or are not fundamental—i.e. which do or do not carve at the joints. (“Roughly speaking” because in my ultimate regimentation, talk of joint-carving isn’t about any entities at all.) These approaches differ importantly. Second, ‘is a fundamental entity’ runs together two different ideas (within my framework anyway): that of an object whose existence is nonfundamental (i.e. an object that is only in the range of a nonfundamental quantifier) and that of an object whose nature is nonfundamental (perhaps in the sense of instantiating no fundamental properties). See sections 8.5–8.7.
Merricks intends ‘irrelevant’ so as to preclude the holding of an in-virtue-of relation; and by saying that fundamental cities “are not supposed to be” cities, he means, I take it, that it follows from the definition of ‘fundamental city’ that fundamental cities aren’t Cs. To simplify, let’s redefine ‘fundamental city’ so that not being a C is part of the definition. Then NFC can be rewritten thus:

\[\text{NFC}': \text{Nothing is: a fundamental entity, a city, and not a C}\]

Then what I want to say is that NFC’ holds in virtue of the fact that nothing is: a fundamental entity, a C, and not a C.

One might worry that NFC’ is not contradictory, and yet is said to hold in virtue of something contradictory. But such a situation is unproblematic, given the nature of in-virtue-of. When \(P\) holds in virtue of \(Q\), \(Q\) is supposed to be the underlying metaphysics of \(P\), and not a matter of \(P\)’s meaning. A linguistically competent speaker may express \(P\) without having any idea that it holds in virtue of \(Q\), and indeed may be unable to express \(Q\). Seeking in-virtue-of facts is thus nothing like conceptual analysis. So it is unproblematic that NFC’ might harbor a “metaphysical contradiction” in the sense of holding in virtue of a contradictory fact, without this metaphysical contradiction being detectable simply by reflecting on NFC’ and its meaning.

Thus the “purely metaphysical” nature of in-virtue-of is the key to addressing Merricks’s concern. Perhaps the issue can be brought out in a slightly different way. I accept:

\[\text{NFM: Modality is not a fundamental concept}\]

But that means that any fact involving modality must hold in virtue of a fact that doesn’t involve modality. (By NFM, any fact involving modality is impure, and so must, given purity and completeness, hold in virtue of some pure fact, which by NFM cannot involve modality.) But NFM itself is a modality-involving fact. What non-modality-involving fact does it hold in virtue of? My answer is: the fact that \(M\) is not a fundamental concept, where \(M\) is a “metaphysical definition” of modality (\(M\) will be a metaphysical definition of my Humean account of modality, as discussed below).\(^7\) But consider a defender of primitive modality, who disagrees with me about NFM. She might protest that the fact that \(M\) is not a fundamental concept is not what she means to be rejecting, when she rejects NFM. It is obvious that \(M\) is not a fundamental concept, she might say; what she rejects is the claim that modality is nonfundamental. My response

\(^7\)See p. 137 on denials of joint-carving.
here, as before, is to emphasize again that when $P$ holds in virtue of $Q$, $Q$ is not a sort of unveiling of what $P$ means.\footnote{It may be confusing that in my official presentation, I speak of metaphysical semantics rather than in-virtue-of. But a \textit{metaphysical} semantics, as I develop that notion, is quite different from what linguists and philosophers of language are after (section 7.4).} The in-virtue-of-relation is purely metaphysical. (In this respect, though not others, it is similar to supervenience.) So the modalist’s insistence that by denying NFM she does not mean to deny that $M$ is a nonfundamental concept does not speak against NFM holding in virtue of that very fact.

Merricks has a followup argument concerning my distinction between “deflationist” and “nihilist” positions. To illustrate the distinction: deflationists and nihilists about causation agree that causation fails to carve at the joints, where by ‘causation’ they mean that notion expressed by the ordinary English word ‘cause’. But the deflationist says further that all notions of causation, and not just the English one, fail to carve at the joints, whereas the nihilist says that one can introduce a joint-carving notion of causation—causation*, let’s call it—and goes on to claim, using that notion, that nothing causes* anything.\footnote{There is a delicate question of what ‘a notion of causation’ means, if it’s to include notions that are distinct from the ordinary English notion of causation—i.e., distinct from causation. The rough idea is that the notion plays a similar inferential role.} The nihilist about causation says that in the most fundamental sense of causation, nothing causes anything, but is willing to concede that there are many metaphysically second-rate ways to talk about causation (including the ordinary English one) under which it would be true to say that some things cause other things. The deflationist about causation, on the other hand, accepts merely the many second-rate ways to talk about causation, and denies that there is any fundamental way to talk about it.

Merricks’s followup argument is that the metaphysical nihilist’s claim that ‘cause*’ carves at the joints is incoherent. He says:

‘Causes*’ amounts to something like \textit{causes and is fundamental}. By the lights of one who denies that causation carves at the joints—and so by the lights of the causal nihilist—‘causes*’ is akin to ‘fundamental city’.

But since my view implies that ‘fundamental city’ does not carve at the joints, he says, ‘causes*’ can’t carve at the joints either.

The problem here is the assumption that ‘causes*’ means “causes and is fundamental”\footnote{The logical form of the latter is not clear, but this doesn’t affect the following argument.}. Merricks thus assumes that ‘causes*’ is defined in terms of
‘cause’ — i.e., our notion of causation, the ordinary English one, which does not carve at the joints according to the causal nihilist. If ‘cause*’ were thus defined then the causal nihilist would indeed be barred from saying that it carves at the joints. But I did not define ‘cause*’ in terms of ‘cause’. My idea, rather, was for the causal nihilist to introduce ‘cause*’ as an undefined predicate, but with the meaning-fixing stipulation that it is to carve at the joints and to play an inferential role like ‘cause’ in certain respects.11

Merricks turns, finally, to my “Humean” account of (metaphysical) necessity. According to this account, for a proposition to be necessary is roughly for it to be a logical consequence of a certain class of propositions, the “modal axioms”. Modal axioms come in different sorts, including mathematical truths, analytic truths (under a certain conception of analyticity), “laws of metaphysics”, and “axioms of a metaphysical semantics”. The account is a highly “deflationary” one in that no metaphysically deep condition is given to unite all the modal axioms. They are given by a mere list (mathematical truths, analytic truths, …), which is selected, so to speak, “by us rather than by the world”—perhaps by linguistic convention.

Merricks’s first objection is this:

Sider’s reduction of necessity implies that the question of whether the laws of nature are necessary or instead contingent is not a substantive question about the metaphysics of those laws. But many metaphysicians—including many who think that modality has some reduction or other—will think that this implication is false. And I think that this implication is false. Thus I object that Sider’s reduction of necessity is false because it has a false implication.

This is a little too quick. A question is nonsubstantive, to a first approximation, when it has different answers under different “candidate meanings” of the crucial terms in the question (chapter 4). The crucial term in modal questions is ‘necessarily’, which according to the Humean account does indeed have different candidate meanings, corresponding to different possible choices for what counts as a modal axiom. But not just anything counts as a candidate meaning. For instance, no candidate meaning counts a falsehood as a modal axiom—because, I would argue, any language using the term ‘necessarily’ with such a meaning would be “semantically alien” (p. 50). So the Humean account

11 Of course, if the world is as the causal deflationist says it is, those two stipulations cannot be jointly satisfied, and the term will be semantically empty. See section 5.3 and Sider (2013b) for more on the introduction of terms like ‘cause’.
does not *immediately* imply that the question of whether the laws of nature are necessary is nonsubstantive; it must in addition be established that the answer to the question turns on which candidate set of modal axioms our language selects.

However, I’m willing to concede that the answer to the question does turn on this selection. Suppose that the “best-system” account of the laws of nature is correct (as I think it is—section 3.1): laws are generalization in the simplest and most powerful deductive system cast in joint-carving terms. In my view, given what we in fact mean by ‘necessary’, these generalizations are not necessary, since they aren’t implied by any of the modal axioms. But a language that uses ‘necessary’ a little differently, by including best-system laws of nature as additional modal axioms, does not strike me as semantically alien. Speakers of this language are still using ‘necessary’ to accomplish roughly the same semantic task as we use it to accomplish; they just do so a little differently. (Compare: our linguistic community chooses not to count the Pope as a ‘bachelor’, or so I assume, but a linguistic community that did would still accomplish the same semantic task with that word as we do.) After all, the laws of metaphysics are modal axioms, and in my view, the laws of nature and the laws of metaphysics aren’t so very different. So I concede that the Humean account implies that whether the laws are necessary is not a substantive question. Its answer is an artifact of a somewhat arbitrary semantic choice on our part (like the answer to the question of whether the Pope is a bachelor).

Merricks insists that the modal status of the laws of nature is substantive, but doesn’t say why. So perhaps we just have a standoff. But it may help to point out that the Humean account doesn’t have as harsh implications about laws of nature as one might think. In particular, it doesn’t imply that it’s nonsubstantive what the right metaphysics of lawhood is. It’s only the modal status of lawhood that is nonsubstantive.

This is particularly important because the modal status of laws normally comes up in discussions of the general metaphysics of lawhood. Indeed, most philosophers more or less read off their views about the modal status of laws from their views about the nature of laws. Defenders of the best-system theory and the DTA theory, for instance, tend to hold that the laws are contingent, whereas defenders of scientific essentialism tend to regard them as necessary. And the question of which of these three metaphysical accounts of laws is correct remains substantive, even given the Humean account, because the
question of which theory of lawhood is correct is not a modal matter. So if Merricks’s insistence on the substantivity of modal status resonates with you, please check that you aren’t conflating this with the substantivity of the nature of lawhood.

Merricks’s second objection is to my attack on “arguments from possibility”—arguments of the form: Possibly, P; it’s not contingent whether P; so, P. I claimed that my Humean account undermines such arguments for conclusions in fundamental metaphysics. When P concerns fundamental metaphysics, any reason for believing the premise that P is possible, I said, is going to be a direct reason for believing the conclusion that P is actual; but if you had such a reason, you wouldn’t need the argument from possibility—that argument becomes superfluous. Merricks says that my critique would generalize, and would thus undermine all arguments from possibility. I think not; but seeing why requires examining the critique in detail.

Consider an argument from possibility for the proposition, UC, that composition is unrestricted. For a proposition to be possible is for its negation to not be necessary. So according to the Humean account, the argument’s premise that UC is possible amounts to the claim that not-UC is not a consequence of the set A of modal axioms. Now, the only modal axioms that might imply not-UC are the laws of metaphysics; and we may assume for simplicity’s sake that the only would-be law of metaphysics that might do this is not-UC itself. So for anyone apprised of this setup—of the truth of the Humean account, of the nature of laws of metaphysics, and so forth—the premise that UC is possible amounts to the claim that not-UC is not a law of metaphysics. Moreover, there aren’t any reasons available for thinking that not-UC is not a law of metaphysics, other than reasons for thinking that UC is true. For the “laws

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12This last claim is complicated a little by the fact that scientific essentialism is sometimes formulated in modal terms (see e.g. Hawthorne (2001) for a discussion of the issue, construed modally). But it’s far from clear that it ought to be. Perhaps it should instead be formulated as the thesis that the real definitions of scientific properties somehow involve lawhood, or that the grounds of particular matters of fact somehow involve lawhood, or that all fundamental facts in which scientific properties are attributed also somehow involve lawhood. I explore these issues in forthcoming work. Second, it’s natural to regard modally-formulated scientific essentialism as including the claim (or at least the presupposition) that modality is fundamental (contrary to what the Humean theory says), and the question of whether this claim is true remains a substantive one even given the Humean theory.

13Pp. 277–8; and see also Sider (2013a, section 10).

14I do think my critique generalizes to some other cases, such as arguments from possibility for mathematical conclusions.
of metaphysics" are just those propositions of a certain sort that happen to be true, and it’s known in this case that not-UC is of the relevant sort; thus it’s known that not-UC is a law of metaphysics if it’s true. So the only reason one could have for thinking that UC is not a law of metaphysics would be a reason to think that not-UC isn’t true—a reason to think that UC is true. In particular, the conceivable of UC is no reason to think that not-UC is not a law of metaphysics, and thus is no reason to think that UC is possible.

To see that this reasoning doesn’t generalize, note first that it’s not always true that the only available reasons for thinking that \( p \) is possible are reasons for thinking that \( p \) is true. This was so in the previous case because \( p \)’s negation (not-UC) was known to be the type of proposition that is a modal axiom (in particular, a law of metaphysics) if it’s true.\(^{15}\) But in other cases one can know that \( p \) isn’t a modal axiom without having any idea whether \( p \) is true. I can know that the proposition that there are an even number of trees in North America is possible without knowing whether it’s true, simply by noting that its negation isn’t the sort of proposition that could be a modal axiom (nor could it be entailed by modal axioms): it’s the sort of proposition that, even if true, wouldn’t be a law of metaphysics, or a mathematical truth, or any other sort of modal axiom (nor are there other modal axioms that would imply it).

No argument from possibility could be based on this last example since the number of the trees in North America is contingent. Can the Humean admit that some arguments from possibility are indeed successful? The matter is a little tricky. Two of Merricks’s examples of arguments from possibility are arguments against the justified-true-belief theory of knowledge and Utilitarianism; but if those doctrines are taken extensionally then their negations are, respectively, that some person and proposition are such that it’s not the case that the person knows the proposition iff she has a justified true belief, and even Merricks will agree that since it’s contingent whether any people or actions exist, these conclusions are contingent and hence can’t be established by an argument from possibility. So the doctrines must be understood differently, if they’re to be establishable by arguments from possibility.

One might understand them as having modal content. For instance, letting \( q \) be the proposition that any person knows iff she has justified true belief, the JTB theory of knowledge could be taken to be \( \Box q \) rather than merely \( q \),

\(^{15}\) And because it was known that no other modal axiom would imply not-\( p \).
in which case the Gettier argument Merricks considers would have the form: \( \Diamond \sim \Box q \); it's not contingent whether \( \Box q \); therefore, \( \sim \Box q \). The second premise is now presumably true, so the question is the status of the first premise, which we may simplify to \( \sim \Box \Box q \). Now, one thing I didn't do in my book is extend the Humean account to iterated modalities. But so long as such an extension is possible and vindicates the T-rule that \( \Box \phi \) implies \( \phi \), the Humean can allow the following sort of reasoning in favor of \( \sim \Box \Box q \):

The only kinds of modal axioms that might imply \( q \) are analytic truths (compare the proposition that any bachelor is male) and axioms in a metaphysical semantics (compare the proposition that any \( C \) is a city). But the conceivability of a person who has knowledge but not a justified true belief is arguably evidence that \( q \) isn't implied by any such propositions. So \( q \) isn't necessary: \( \sim \Box q \). And so, by the T-rule, \( \sim \Box \Box q \).

This argument appeals in a crude way to a fact about conceivability to establish a conclusion about analyticity and axiomhood in a metaphysical semantics. But the appeal could be made more sophisticated, or replaced by other sources of evidence, such as empirical information about linguistic usage. The crucial point is that there are in-principle sources of evidence available for thinking that \( q \) isn't implied by the modal axioms, and these reasons are not of a sort that would render the modal Gettier argument superfluous.

(Merricks also mentions a third argument from possibility: the use of the possibility of Black's spheres to refute the identity of indiscernibles ("II"). Here I want to stick up for my critique, for reasons roughly parallel to those given in the case of UC. The claim that it's possible for Black's spheres to exist (\( \Diamond \text{BS} \)) amounts to the claim that not-BS is not a consequence of the laws of metaphysics; the only relevant would-be law of metaphysics is II itself; so a reason to believe \( \Diamond \text{BS} \) would need to be a direct reason against II, mooting the argument from possibility against II.)

In a nutshell, arguments from possibility have a fighting chance in some cases but not others because we have different sorts of access to different sorts of modal axioms. When a sentence is of the right sort, only direct evidence for its truth or falsity is relevant to whether it is a law of metaphysics. But for sentences of the right sort to be analytic (for instance), other sorts of evidence (such as conceivability) are potentially relevant.

So I don't agree that my critique of arguments from possibility would generalize as much as Merricks says it would. Nevertheless, I must concede
that my discussion of this topic was incomplete. More work needs to be done to explore exactly when such arguments succeed, given the Humean account, and, more generally, to explore how much of our existing practice using modal notions can be reconstructed in Humean terms.

References


