

# Mirosław Szatkowski and Peter van Inwagen

## Interview with Peter van Inwagen

### 1

#### **Mirosław Szatkowski:**

Peter, you told me in one of your e-mails that metaphysics is not only the passion of your life, but something more – it is the love of your life.<sup>1</sup> How did you find this love? What were the beginnings of your fascination with metaphysics?

#### **Peter van Inwagen:**

When I was starting out in philosophy, when I was, so to speak, beginning to be a philosopher, I should have described my interests as centered not on “metaphysics” but on certain philosophical problems: the problem of free will and determinism, the problem of fictional existence, the nature of modality.<sup>2</sup> As time passed, however, I began to use the term ‘metaphysics’ to tie the members of this rather diverse set of problems together. (As I became interested in further problems – the nature of material objects and their relations to their parts, the problem of identity across time, the problem of nominalism and realism –, I continued to use the word ‘metaphysics’ as a general term to tie the problems I was interested in together. I do not think that I became interested in these further problems because someone had classified them as belonging to ‘metaphysics’.) But why did I use *that* word? This is a hard question to answer because it is not at all clear what it

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<sup>1</sup> Peter van Inwagen added at a later date:

I fear my wife and children will be distressed to discover that I have said that metaphysics is *the* love of my life, for they have been accustomed to regarding metaphysics (or accustomed to regarding philosophy – for they would not distinguish between metaphysics and philosophy) as no more than a serious rival for my affections. (If I am in my study, and my wife is asked where I am, she shrugs and replies, “Oh, he’s with his mistress, Philosophia.”)

<sup>2</sup> My answer to this question and my answers to questions (2), (3), (5), and (5a) are “reprints” (with some adaptations and revisions – in most cases, minor ones) of my answers to some very similar questions in “Answers to Five Questions about Metaphysics,” which was included in Asbjorn Steglich-Petersen (ed.) *Metaphysics: 5 Questions* (Automatic Press/VIP, 2010). (See pp. 179–185.) My answers to questions (4), (6), (7), (8), and (9) appear here for the first time. (Perhaps in the case of questions (6) and (9), I should say ‘responses’ rather than ‘answers’.)

means to classify a philosophical problem as metaphysical. I had long been aware that ‘metaphysics’ and ‘metaphysical’ were problematical terms, but I did not fully appreciate how problematical they were till a few years ago when I began to write the article “Metaphysics” for *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Even when I had not seriously thought about any other philosophical problem than the problem of free will and determinism, I described my interest in that problem as “metaphysical”. (Or perhaps I said, “I’m interested in the *metaphysical* problem of free will and determinism” – implying that there was more than one philosophical problem that could be called ‘the problem of free will and determinism’ and that I was interested in the one that was metaphysical.) I said this because I believed that determinism – the thesis that only one future is consistent with the present state of things and the laws of nature (or the laws of physics) – was a metaphysical thesis and that any problem that essentially involved determinism was therefore a metaphysical problem.

But what did I mean by saying that determinism was a metaphysical thesis? That would be hard to say. I think it’s clear what the, as one might say, phenomenology of my choosing that term was. Most other writers on the problem of free will and determinism did not think of determinism in the very abstract way that I did – or so at least it appeared to me. *They* were not thinking in terms of “the laws of nature” or “the laws of physics”. *They* had not had scientific educations – not even the first few stages of a scientific education that I had had. *They* had never had to answer examination questions like, “An artillery piece is fired at an elevation of 37 degrees. The muzzle velocity of the shell is 2000 meters/second. What will the position and velocity of the shell be ten seconds later? (Neglect air resistance and the rotation of the earth.)” I could see that these examination questions had answers – as, of course, examination questions should. I could see that (neglecting air resistance and the rotation of the earth, to be sure), Newton’s laws of motion and assumption that the acceleration due to gravity near the surface of the earth is a given that does not vary from case to case jointly implied that the elevation of a gun and the muzzle velocity of a shell fired from it were together sufficient to *determine* the position and velocity of the shell at any moment between the moment the gun was fired and the moment of impact.

Determinism, as I saw determinism, was a generalization of and abstraction from the fact that certain questions have answers – the questions about the evolution of physical systems that constitute such a high proportion of the exercises that one finds at the ends of the chapters in physics textbooks. (That is to say: the author of the text gives the student some numbers that describe the state of a system at one time and expects the student to produce some numbers that describe its state at some later time.) The generalization, however, and the abstraction are extreme, and their extremity takes one outside science. In making this generaliz-

ation one quantifies over laws of physics and the physical quantities that occur in them – over real laws of physics, God’s-eye laws of physics, which may well be radically different from any of those principles that scientists and engineers of the present day use to grind out numbers that characterize the behavior of projectiles and planets and protons. And quantifying over real, God’s-eye, laws of physics is not something that is done “within” the science of physics or within any other science. It was because my approach to the problem of free will and determinism had this sort of “feel” that I described it as ‘metaphysical’. (As opposed to what? Well, as opposed to ‘psychological’, ‘linguistic’, ‘commonsensical’, ‘ethical’ – all words I used to describe the approaches to the problem of free will and determinism that I found in the work of various other writers.)

The preceding two paragraphs were an attempt to describe what was in my mind when I said that the determinism I was interested in was “metaphysical” determinism. (Other philosophers might use the word ‘determinism’ as a name for – say – the thesis that human action is determined to occur by the agent’s desires and beliefs at the moment just prior to that action. That sort of thesis wasn’t ... well, metaphysical enough to engage *my* refined interest.) Perhaps this attempt was successful and perhaps not, but it was certainly not much help with the question, What did I *mean* by calling the kind of determinism I was interested in “metaphysical” determinism. After all, that question has an answer only insofar as I did mean something by ‘metaphysical’, and it’s not now evident to me that there was anything much I meant by the word – or anything much beyond this: a philosophical thesis is metaphysical if (i) it can’t be assigned with confidence to any other part of philosophy, and (ii) it involves a very high level of abstraction.

And what, if anything, do I mean by ‘metaphysics’ now? I have no interesting answer to this question. For an extended exploration of the question ‘What does “metaphysics” mean?’ (and for some difficulties I now see in an earlier attempt of mine to answer this question), see the article in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* that I mentioned above.

What keeps me interested in the questions I *call* metaphysical (beyond the interest each of them has for me *individually*, in and of *itself*: I just *am* interested in the problem of identity across time; I just *am* interested in the question whether there are abstract objects), is that the attempt to answer them seems in every case to involve a certain kind of thinking (there is a certain kind of thinking such that, in every case of a question I call metaphysical, when I attempt to answer that question I find myself engaging in that kind of thinking). It seems, moreover, that *only* the questions I call metaphysical call for that kind of thinking. I will attempt to describe the nature of this kind of thinking in my answer to question (5). Here I want to say something that is not about its nature but about what it is like to engage in it. I will do this by contrasting it with another kind of philosophical

thinking that I have some experience of. Most of my philosophical thinking that is not about metaphysics belongs to Christian apologetic. (Which does not of course imply that none of my apologetic thinking is metaphysical thinking – that would be false.) This thinking could be looked upon as being in the service of “applied philosophy”. (When apologetic is done by a philosopher, it is generally fair to describe it as applied philosophy.) It is the kind of thinking one does when one is defending an ethical or political or aesthetic or religious position that one considers particularly important against some reasoned attack by an opponent of that position. A good example of the kind of thinking I have in mind can be found in my papers “Non Est Hick” and “Critical Studies of the New Testament and Users of the New Testament”. If Christianity is not the illusion most philosophers suppose it to be, what I have done in these and other essays of the same type may well be – depending on how good it is and whom it has reached – more important, perhaps vastly more important, than my work in metaphysics. But it is clear to me from my own experience of engaging in the kind of thinking that goes into these essays that that thinking does not engage the full resources of my mind. And that is not what I would say of the kind of thinking on display, for good or ill, in *Material Beings* or the essays collected in *Ontology, Identity, and Modality and Existence: Essays in Ontology*. Only when I am thinking about matters like “the special composition question” or Lewis’s modal ontology or Putnam’s criticisms of Quine’s ontological method do I feel that my mind is fully awake. (I do not identify myself with my mind; I am not saying that I am fully awake only when I am engaged in metaphysical thinking. One in fact doesn’t want one’s mind to be fully awake any very high proportion of the time – if for no other reason, because when one’s mind is fully awake, one’s capacities for interacting with other human beings in all sorts of important ways will be asleep. If the Good Samaritan’s mind had been fully awake when he was on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, he would have been too wrapped up in his own thoughts even to have noticed the man who had fallen among thieves.) And this sort of thinking is addictive. I hope that when I am no longer able to do it, I shall be aware of this fact and able gracefully to stop trying to it. Till then, however, I have no choice but to continue indulging my addiction.

Having re-read what I have just written, it occurs to me that it may well be that I call a question metaphysical just in the case that my attempt to answer it involves the kind of thinking I have been trying to describe.

## 2

### **Mirosław Szatkowski:**

You are the author of 6 books and over 200 articles. How would you characterize your work? Which problems have especially absorbed you? What answers have you given. What is your contribution to the edifice of metaphysics?

### **Peter van Inwagen:**

I think I did as much as anyone to undermine the view that was the consensus on the problem of free will in the middle sixties when I began graduate studies in philosophy. This view was that the problem of free will was a solved problem. And the solution was ‘compatibilism’: the thesis that free will and determinism are compatible (because ‘X was able to do otherwise’ means something conditional, something along the general lines of, ‘X would have done otherwise if X had chosen to do otherwise’).

I think also that I left the problem of free will and determinism *clearer*, more precisely stated, than I found it. (It saddens me that those now working on the problem of free will and determinism are, or a significant proportion of them are, engaged in simply throwing all that hard-won clarity away. If one examines a really clear piece of writing on the problem of free will and determinism – for example, David Lewis’s great essay, “Are We Free to Break the Laws?” – and the kind of thing that makes up no small part of what is written about free will and determinism today, the contrast is astonishing.)

I attach some importance to my defense of an “abstractionist” modal ontology – and particularly to my reply to David Lewis’s charge that anyone who claims so much as to *understand* the language in which abstractionists frame their modal ontology is in effect claiming to possess magical powers of understanding.

I think that I did as much as anyone to create “the problem of material constitution”. And I was certainly the philosopher who brought the “Special Composition Question” to the attention of the philosophers who were working on material constitution (despite the fact that I was not the first philosopher to formulate the question).

I think I have had some important things to say certain problems about the identity of things and persons across time. I think that some of the things I have said about the concept of a temporal part and about the psychological-continuity theory of personal identity are worth paying attention to.

I believe I am responsible for metaphysicians’ having come to think in terms of a distinction between ‘ontology’ and ‘meta-ontology’ – ontology being the discip-

line that asks the question ‘What is there?’ and meta-ontology being the discipline that asks the question, “What are we asking when we ask ‘What is there?’?”

### 3

#### **Miroslaw Szatkowski:**

Which metaphysical issues remain open? What areas of research would you recommend to future generations?

#### **Peter van Inwagen:**

At the turn of the millennium, I should have recommended that metaphysicians pay serious attention to the field I dubbed ‘meta-ontology’. Happily, no such recommendation is now necessary. I hope that the current lively debates about meta-ontology (such as those on display in the 2009 collection *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*) will continue and deepen.

I hope that in the coming decades, metaphysicians will devote considerably more time than they so far have to the topic of the relative merits of constituent and relational ontologies.

Constituent ontologies are ontologies that affirm the existence of attributes (properties, qualities, characteristics, features) and which, moreover, treat these objects as being in some sense “constituents” of the substances (individuals, particulars) that have them (exemplify them, instantiate them, exhibit them). The theory that individuals are “bundles” of qualities is a paradigmatic example of a constituent ontology – for if  $x$  is a bundle of  $y$ s, those  $y$ s must in some sense be constituents of  $x$ .

Relational ontologies are ontologies that affirm the existence of attributes but which treat the “having” relation as in no way like the whole-to-part relation – as not even remotely analogous to that relation or to any mereological relation. According to the advocates of relational ontology, the binary relation “having” that Mars and a socialist banner bear to the quality redness is as abstract, as bloodless, as purely external, as the variably polyadic relation “are numbered by” that the moons of Mars and the epics of Homer bear to the number two. It is an axiom of relational ontology that the only “constituents” of any substance (individual, particular) are its parts, its parts in the strict and mereological sense; and, further, that any proper parts a substance (individual, particular) has are “smaller” members of the same ontological category: smaller substances (smaller individuals, smaller particulars).

Many metaphysicians have endorsed and have worked within a constituent ontology. Many metaphysicians have endorsed and have worked within a relational ontology. But an examination of the relative merits of constituent ontologies (on the one hand) and relational ontologies (on the other) is a neglected and important topic.

I also hope that some metaphysicians will turn their attention to the question of the implications a relational ontology for the philosophy of mind. My own investigation of this question can be found in, “A Materialist Ontology of the Human Person” in the collection *Persons: Human and Divine* (Oxford: 2007) that Dean Zimmerman and I edited, and in “Causation and the Mental”, in *Existence: Essays in Ontology*.

## 4

### **Mirosław Szatkowski:**

Don't you think that metaphysics is a 'machine' producing questions to which there are no answers whatsoever, or to which there is a multitude of competing answers, none of which can be selected as unambiguously correct?

### **Peter van Inwagen:**

I don't know what to do with the “machine” metaphor. But I will say this. Some of the interrogative sentences put forward by metaphysicians as supposed vehicles of metaphysical questions are meaningless – and are thus not vehicles of questions at all – and some are not. Metaphysical questions, of course, have answers – for they are *questions*, and, as Wittgenstein has said, “The *riddle* does not exist. If a question can be put at all, it can be answered.”<sup>3</sup> (I interpret ‘it can be answered’ as ‘it has an answer’, and not as ‘it is possible for someone to answer it’.) But I doubt whether our human minds – in our fallen condition, in this present life – are so constituted as to enable us to answer very many of them (if any). (Compare this remark to what I say about philosophical arguments in my answer to Question 8.) Of course, if one metaphysician answers the question “Are there universals?” Yes and another answers it No, one of them must be right. (Assume for the sake of the example that the sentence ‘There are universals’ is meaningful and, moreover,

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<sup>3</sup> *Das R ä t s e l gibt es nicht. Wenn sich eine Frage überhaupt stellen läßt, so kann sie auch beantwortet werden. – Tractatus, 6.51*

has a precise enough meaning for it to express one determinate proposition.) But, I contend, the answer given by whichever of them is right will almost certainly lack *warrant* (in Plantinga's sense).

I must add this to what I have said: the same is true of questions posed in moral and political philosophy, in epistemology, in the philosophy of mathematics, and in all other parts or areas of philosophy. Metaphysics is no worse off in this respect than any of those other parts of philosophy. And that includes metaphilosophy and therefore includes the critiques of metaphysics offered by philosophers like Kant (well, in his case, his critique of *transcendent* metaphysics) and Carnap and van Fraassen. A metametaphysical proposition like 'Metaphysical statements are meaningless' is in the same unsatisfactory epistemological position as a metaphysical proposition like 'Qualities inhere in particulars' or 'There is more than one mode of being'. And a metametametaphysical proposition like the one expressed by the previous sentence is in that position, too – and so *ad infinitum*.

## 5

### **Miroslaw Szatkowski:**

Which research method in metaphysics would you favour? Does such a thing as specific metaphysical cognition exist?<sup>4</sup>

### **Peter van Inwagen:**

William James has said, "Metaphysics means only an unusually obstinate attempt to think clearly and consistently." While this will hardly do as a *definition* of metaphysics, it is not a bad statement of the only *method* we metaphysicians have. A fuller attempt to answer this question can only take the form of a series of footnotes to this statement – can only be an attempt at a statement of what a metaphysician's obstinate attempt to think clearly and consistently should involve.

Bas van Fraassen, an avowed enemy of metaphysics, seems to believe that the method of metaphysics (insofar as a pseudo-discipline can have a method) is that of "inference to the best explanation". As scientists are said by some to

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<sup>4</sup> The original form of question (5) was "Which research method in metaphysics would you favour? Does such a thing as specific metaphysical cognition exist? In what way can it be valuable to other research disciplines?" I have taken it upon myself to "split" this question into (5) – as it appears in the text – and (5a), which is "In what way can metaphysics be valuable to other research disciplines?"



survey a set of empirical data and then try to come up with a theory that is the best explanation of those data, metaphysicians, van Fraassen maintains, (think they) proceed by surveying some set of data (I will not attempt to say what these data might be) and then attempting to construct theories that explain them. These metaphysicians (so they suppose) then proceed to compare the theories they have constructed to explain one of these sets of data with an eye to discovering which one best explains them. (What the standards of comparison are, I will not attempt to say.) And it may be that van Fraassen is right to say that this is what some metaphysicians (think they) are up to – and right in his unflattering comparison of the fruits of their labors with those of the labors of physicists and geologists and microbiologists. Van Fraassen errs, however, in supposing that this “method” (I agree entirely with his low opinion of its fruits) is essential to metaphysics, and I am doubtful whether it is very commonly employed by philosophers who call themselves metaphysicians. Like many people who offer unflattering diagnoses of the ills that afflict some field of human endeavor, van Fraassen has fallen in love with his diagnosis and applies it indiscriminately and uncritically. “You’re one of the people he’s applied it to, right?” Very perceptive, Reader. But if I use my own work as an example, at least I’m in a position to have an informed opinion concerning the method of the person I’m using as an example. Van Fraassen has written,

When interpreting scientific theories, we see might careful attention to the empirical aspect, and the relation of the empirically superfluous parameters introduced to the observable phenomenon. That is why the Cartesian theory of vortices should receive considerably more respect – I’ll say the same about Bohm’s particles – than, e.g., Peter van Inwagen or David Lewis’s mereological atoms. Mere observance of correct logical form does not make a theory genuinely valuable: in Tom Stoppard’s phrase, it can be coherent nonsense. (“Replies to Discussion on *The Empirical Stance*”, *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 121/2 (2004), pp. 171–192. The quoted passage is on p. 181.)

If I understand what van Fraassen is saying, he thinks that the “mereological atoms” that occur in a certain metaphysical theory of mine – the theory presented in *Material Beings* – are “there” for some metaphysical reason: that they are a “metaphysical posit”, that I have *postulated* them because, in my view, postulating them aids in explaining some set of data I have set out to explain. In fact, however, the mereological atoms are there because, rightly or wrongly (wrongly, Ladyman, *et al.* would say), I thought that the physicists said that matter had an atomic structure. Feynman has said:

If in some cataclysm all scientific knowledge were to be destroyed and only one sentence passed on to the next generation of creatures, what statement would contain the most information in the fewest words? I believe it is the atomic hypothesis (or atomic fact, or

whatever you wish to call it) that all things are made of atoms – little particles that move around in perpetual motion, attracting each other when they are a little distance apart, but repelling upon being squeezed into one another. In that one sentence, you will see there is an enormous amount of information about the world, if just a little imagination and thinking are applied. – Richard Feynman, Robert B. Leighton, and Matthew Sands, *The Feynman Lectures on Physics*, 3 Vols. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1963–65), Vol. I, p. 2.

Feynman, of course, is talking about atoms in the modern, chemical sense. In that sense, “atoms” are not what van Fraassen calls *mereological* atoms – but Feynman would certainly not have objected to the statement that, just as “all things” (all things that are present to the senses or that can be seen through an optical microscope) are “made of (chemical) atoms,” so chemical atoms are made of electrons and protons and neutrons (and perhaps photons), and protons and neutrons are made of quarks (and perhaps gluons). And there are good empirical reasons to suppose that electrons and quarks (and photons and gluons) are not “made of” anything (or, if you like, that they are not represented by the “standard theory” of elementary particles as made of anything): that they are (represented as) mereological atoms. And there is good reason to think that future physical theories, successors to the standard theory, if they do not postulate electrons and so on, will postulate partless things (little vibrating “loops of string,” perhaps – but little loops of string that neither have proper parts nor are made of a stuff called string.) It is as certain as anything in this area can be that no physics descended from present-day physics is going to represent the physical world as consisting of continuous, homeomerous Aristotelian matter or as consisting of “gunk”. Physics is (pretty clearly) always going to be “atomistic” in *some* not entirely empty sense. Physics is always going to have to find some sense for statements like, “The matter – the *stuff* – that was in this test tube after the reaction is the same matter that was in it before the reaction – albeit in a different form.” And this sense, when spelled out, is (pretty clearly) always going to involve phrases of the form ‘same Xs’ where ‘Xs’ represents a plural count-noun. So what I am I *supposed* to do when I’m constructing a metaphysical theory about the identities of physical objects across time – a theory that involves the notion of “same matter”? Adopt an *Aristotelian* understanding of “same matter”? No, I simply borrowed the current scientific account of “same matter” (and perhaps registered my conviction that any future scientific account of “same matter” will be like the present-day account in being – in a very broad sense – atomistic). In sum, the mereological atoms are present in my metaphysical theory simply because I believe what the physicists tell me about matter – or at any rate, I believe what I *believe* they’ve told me. Even if I’ve misinterpreted them, even if my understanding of them is as feeble as Ladyman *et al.* think it is, my mereological atoms are not present in my

metaphysical theory for a metaphysical reason. Van Fraassen thinks that they are only because he has brought to his reading of *Material Beings* a theory about what metaphysicians think they are doing – a theory that tells him that that’s what I’m doing.

Whether or not this is fair to van Fraassen, I do, as I have said, agree with his contention that trying to construct theories that explain some set of data is not going to yield any metaphysical conclusions of any interest. But then what method or methods *should* metaphysicians employ? I would not presume to dictate to other metaphysicians how they ought to proceed – or not beyond urging them to make an unusually obstinate effort to think clearly and consistently. But I’ll say a few things about what I try to do when I’m doing (what I call) metaphysics.

First, in metaphysics (and I would say, in all parts of “core” philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, and philosophical logic) all words and phrases should be used in their ordinary senses or else explicitly defined. (Physics textbooks can provide some very instructive examples of good, precise definitions of technical terms. I expand on this point in my answer to question (5a).) Definitions should satisfy the following formal requirement. They should be in “Chisholm style”: the *definiendum* should be a sentence – normally an open sentence or a sentence schema – and the *definiens* a sentence containing the same free variables or schematic letters. In metaphysics, all terms of art should be connected to ordinary language by a chain of Chisholm-style definitions. (What I mean is that such a chain of definitions should be possible in principle, implicit in one’s text and easily extracted from the text. One may certainly introduce one’s terms of art more informally if one is confident that the reader will be able to see how to construct the chain of definitions. There’s no call for unnecessary formality. But in borderline cases it’s always better to err on the side of pedantry – for recall Russell’s definition of a pedant: ‘A man who cares whether what he says is true’.) Similarly, one’s arguments should be formally valid – though not necessarily presented in a form that is explicitly so. To say this is not to imply that there are proofs in philosophy as there are proofs in mathematics. It is simply to recommend a trick that will ensure that one is at least *aware* of all one’s premises.

While we are on formal matters, I insist that in core philosophy one be scrupulous about use and mention. Every metaphysician must understand “Quine Corners” or “quasi-quotation marks” and use them when they are appropriate. (In my experience, about eighty per cent of the philosophers who use Quine Corners use them impressionistically, without actually understanding how they work.)

Following these simple rules will enable the philosopher at least to produce what van Fraassen has called coherent nonsense. In my view, it’s much better to write coherent nonsense than to write incoherent nonsense. The reason is simple:

if nonsense is logically coherent, it's much easier to see that it's nonsense and to see why it's nonsense than it is if the nonsense is logically incoherent. For example, if a philosopher's sentence contains a gross use-mention confusion, a reader of the text in which it occurs may suspect that there is some meaningful thesis that the author was *trying* to express – and may find, after re-writing or attempting to re-write the sentence without the use-mention confusion, that there was really no idea there at all. If the author had taken the trouble to write coherent nonsense, the reader would have been spared that task.

But these matters – important though they are – are of merely formal significance. What can I say that is more substantive? I would say that my own method in metaphysics (insofar as I have one) is this:

One should consider those theses that one *brings* to philosophy – theses that (so one supposes) practically everyone, oneself included, accepts, or theses (so one supposes) that have been endorsed by disciplines other than philosophy and in which one reposes a high degree of confidence (economic history, it may be, or microbiology or algebraic topology). One should try to discover what the metaphysical implications of those theses are. If, for example, one wants to know whether there are universals, what one should *not* do is this: collect a set of data (“This thing here is red and that other thing over there is also red”) and attempt to discover whether those data are best explained by a “theory” that “posits” universals; what one *should* do is to ask whether the theses that one brings to philosophy *logically imply* the existence of universals (one will, of course, have provided a careful definition of ‘universal’).

Note that this “method” (better: this piece of methodological advice) has implications for the epistemology of metaphysics. It implies the epistemological problems or questions that confront metaphysicians – those of them who employ this method – fall into two groups: questions that are raised by the things they believed before they came to metaphysics, and questions that are raised by their beliefs concerning the logical implications of those things. (For example: How can one determine whether the existence of the real numbers is a logical implication of the statement that there are bodies whose behavior is governed by the law of universal gravitation?) The questions in the first group are profoundly difficult, but they are not questions that confront metaphysicians because they are metaphysicians: they confront metaphysicians only because, outside or prior to philosophy, they believe what most people believe. (Obviously, therefore, the metaphysician who employs this method will be, in Strawson's words, a “descriptive” rather than a “revisionary” metaphysician.) The questions in the second group are no doubt difficult – some of them are difficult –, but there does not seem to be any good reason to regard them as intractable.

It is important to realize that I have *not* recommended the following method: Treat the theses we accept before we come to metaphysics as data that it is the

business of metaphysics to explain; construct metaphysical theories that explain those data; compare these theories and find the one among them that best explains those data. (The so-called Quine-Putnam Indispensability Argument is an example of this method at work.) No, I'm recommending only that metaphysicians try to discover the metaphysical implications of – the metaphysical theses that are *logical* implications of – the things they believe on non-metaphysical (and, more generally, non-philosophical) grounds.

There is another method, or another methodological idea, that has, I believe, profoundly influenced my own work. But I find this “idea” very difficult to formulate verbally. My best attempt is along these lines:

Let your investigations be centered on general theses, not particular examples. If an otherwise attractive general thesis seems to have counterexamples, try to explain them away. If it is in conflict with particular things we are inclined to say, try to explain the fact that we are inclined to say these things away. Look at the particular theses about things in the light of the general theses you find attractive.

This methodological idea played a central role in the development of the theory I presented in *Material Beings*. In that case, it took something like this form:

Do not begin your investigation of the metaphysics of material objects by asking, e.g., whether there are tables of chairs. Begin by considering possible alternative answers to the Special Composition Question. If the best answer seems to be one that implies that there are no tables or chairs, try to explain the fact that “We all think there are tables and chairs” away. Ask yourself whether there really *is* such a fact as this.

But *Material Beings* is a special and very difficult case. (Many philosophers believe the book to be an essay in revisionary metaphysics. And many who are not guilty of that misreading would be hard-pressed to find a way to regard it as an example of “trying to discover the metaphysical implications of things we all believe”. I do so regard the book, but I cannot defend this view here.) Instead I will give a relatively simple example of the method I am recommending, an example drawn from philosophical logic rather than metaphysics. (It can be more briefly stated and raises fewer side issues than any example I can think of from metaphysics.)

The sentence-schema ‘ $p \rightarrow (\neg p \rightarrow q)$ ’ is a theorem of standard sentential logic. Many philosophers say that this fact implies that ‘ $\rightarrow$ ’ does not represent the ‘if-then’ of “ordinary” English conditionals (“is-‘is’” conditionals, as opposed to “were-‘did’-‘would-be’” conditionals). If it did, they contend (the example, of course, is my own), the sentence

If New York is not in the United States, New York is in California

would be true – which obviously it isn't. And how do they know that it isn't true? Well, they ask themselves whether it's true, and they discover within themselves a conviction that it isn't. In my view, the view embodied in the methodological principle I'm recommending, this isn't what they should be asking. They should, rather, be asking themselves what general logical principles they think govern 'if-then' (and 'or' [inclusive] and 'it is not the case that' and the other little English words and phrases that in some sense correspond to the connectives of formal sentential logic). I would ask these philosophers to consider the following two "ordinary language" logical principles:

ADDITION:  $p$  hence,  $p$  or  $q$

DISJUNCTION-CONDITIONAL:  $p$  or  $q$  hence, if it is not the case that  $p$ , then  $q$

(or, in a rather more long-winded form: it is either the case that  $p$  or the case that  $q$ ; hence, if it is not the case that  $p$ , it is the case that  $q$ ).

And I would ask them to consider the following logical deduction:

1. New York is in the United States Premise
2. Either New York is in the United States or New York is in California (1), ADDITION
3. If New York is not in the United States, then New York is in California (2), DISJUNCTION-CONDITIONAL

No one, I suppose, would be inclined to dispute the sole premise of this argument. And, therefore, if both ADDITION and DISJUNCTION-CONDITIONAL are valid, our little deduction amounts to a *proof* of the conditional 'If New York is not in the United States, New York is in California'. One must, therefore, reject one of the two theses:

ADDITION and DISJUNCTION-CONDITIONAL are both valid,

'If New York is not in the United States, New York is in California' is not true.

The right choice seems to me to be evident: We must accept the first thesis and therefore must reject the second. We may say of the statements 'ADDITION is valid' and 'DISJUNCTION-CONDITIONAL is valid' what Gödel said of the axioms of set theory: they *force themselves upon the mind as true*. (Who would reject the reasoning contained in this passage:

There are two blackboards,  $A$  and  $B$ . Each has a single sentence written on it. The sentence written on  $A$  is true. Therefore, at least one of the two blackboards has a true sentence written on it?

Or in this:

There are two blackboards, *A* and *B*. Each has a single sentence written on it. At least one of the two has a true sentence written on it. Therefore, if the sentence written on *A* is not true, the sentence written on *B* is true?<sup>5</sup>)

As to the second thesis – well, who *cares* what truth-value that bizarre sentence has? – isn't its truth-value a *paradigm case* of a philosophical “don't care”?

As I recommend considering questions like, “What is the truth-value of the conditional ‘If New York is not in the United States, New York is in California?’” only in the light provided by the consideration of much more general logical questions, so I recommend considering questions like, “Are there are tables and chairs?” only in the light provided by the consideration of much more general ontological questions.

## 5a

### **Miroslaw Szatkowski:**

In what way can metaphysics be valuable to other research disciplines?

### **Peter van Inwagen:**

I think that philosophy in general, and metaphysics in particular, have very little to offer the natural sciences. (Philosophy and metaphysics are none the worse for that – just as sociology is none the worse for having nothing to offer to astrophysics.) In making this statement, I mean the phrase ‘the natural sciences’ to be understood in its strictest sense – I mean ‘the natural sciences’ to refer to the kind of research that leads to publications in journals of molecular biology or paleontology or condensed-matter physics. It is, however, a commonplace that not all scientists are content to communicate information about their work only in the pages of such journals – only to their peers, only to specialists in their own and closely related disciplines. According to Bouwsma, Wittgenstein once said (in conversation), “This is the age of popular science, and so cannot be the age of philosophy.” I think that this characteristically gnomonic statement means something like this: This is an age in which popular science plays a role in the general

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<sup>5</sup> Imagine someone who judges that that this reasoning is valid – and who repents that judgment when it is revealed that the sentence written on *A* is ‘New York is in the United States’.

intellectual life of our species that had been played in an earlier age by philosophy (and in a still earlier age by theology). If this is true – and I think it is –, its truth is at least partly explained by two facts: that in the present age, scientists can expect that large numbers of people will listen to what they say on any subject they care to talk about, and that much of what appears under the rubric ‘popular science’ is, to all intents and purposes, philosophy. And this philosophy, the philosophy that infuses many works of popular science, is, I make bold to say, *radically amateur* philosophy, the philosophy of writers who do not know that there is such a thing as philosophy. (These writers no doubt know that there is something *called* ‘philosophy’ but they are unaware that this thing has any bearing on what they are trying to say – or perhaps a few of them do know that they are doing this thing called ‘philosophy’ but assume that, being scientists, they will automatically and without any resources beyond the furnishings of their own minds, be able to do it better than its official practitioners.) I have never seen any philosophical work by scientists (Galileo is the sole exception I am willing to allow) that is of much philosophical interest. And this judgment certainly applies to the attempts of scientists to discuss metaphysics. The attempts of scientists to address large questions outside their own disciplines (but informed by their knowledge of their disciplines) in work addressed to the general public would certainly be much better for some knowledge of what philosophers have had to say about those and related questions.

If metaphysics has nothing to offer the sciences, the sciences – the fruits of the real work of scientists and not their amateur attempts at philosophy – have a great deal to offer metaphysics. Many scientific discoveries are not only relevant to metaphysics but of inestimable metaphysical importance (one might cite the discovery by cosmology that the physical universe had a beginning in time, or the discovery by high-energy physics that material things are ultimately composed of things that are not themselves composed of smaller things – and yes, I know what McCall, Ladyman, and Ross have to say about that thesis). Nevertheless, the exploitation of this important resource for metaphysics (and more generally for philosophy) has been entirely the work of scientifically literate philosophers.

I would also note that, quite apart from the *discoveries* of physics (and the other sciences), many metaphysicians could learn a great deal by carefully studying the way in which the writers of physics textbooks introduce such concepts as “displacement,” “velocity,” “acceleration,” “mass,” “force,” “momentum,” “energy,” “work,” “power,” and “heat.”

I do wish that my colleagues in literature and the social sciences would stop trying to do metaphysics (well, it’s generally *anti*-metaphysics that they’re trying to do). The scientists, philosophical amateurs though they may be, at least have at their disposal a fund of propositions that can serve as premises in metaphys-



ical arguments. The *littérateurs* and the social scientists, however, have no such fund on which to draw. (I do think that literature and the social sciences are relevant to philosophy – and indeed of great philosophical importance. But their relevance is to ethics and political philosophy and, of course, to aesthetics, and not to metaphysics or anti-metaphysics.)

It has long been a complaint of mine that the philosophy of mind suffers from the failure of philosophers of mind to pay sufficient attention to the metaphysical issues their statements involve them in. When I try to read through – as an interested outsider – the course of various debates in the philosophy of mind, I often find them difficult to follow. (That’s the polite way of putting my point. The less polite is: I constantly find myself saying, “What does that even *mean*?”) In a typical work in the philosophy of mind, concepts – and more often than not, they’re metaphysical concepts – are pulled out of the air with no attempt to provide them with any definition or analysis. I will provide two examples of what I’m talking about.

Philosophers of mind like to talk about ‘states’ – mental states, physical states, what-have-you states. And when you ask a philosopher of mind what a ‘state’ is, the reply is generally either a blank stare or something along the lines of, “Well, *you* know – *states*. Please, none of your metaphysician’s ontological quibbling. We philosophers of mind know what we mean when we talk about mental states and physical states, and if you don’t, that’s *your* problem.” I insist on ontological quibbling, however. I insist on asking whether a state is an *attribute* (or a *property, quality, characteristic, or feature*). These are abstract objects, things that exist in all possible worlds and which are without causal powers. And the answer to this question I insist on asking (when any answer is given) is usually something like, “Well of course that’s not what states are. A person’s mental states exist only when he or she is *in* them, and they’re constantly causing and being caused by other states.” And then I have to ask, “But what is there for a state to be but a property? Aunt Milly’s mental and physical states aren’t *substances*, are they? – that is, things that belong to the same ontological category as Aunt Milly herself?” It is rare for the conversation to get as far as this, but if it does, I’m told (I paraphrase), “Well, they’re neither substances nor attributes, they’re *states*. Don’t expect the things we talk about in the philosophy of mind to fit into the neat *a priori* categories you metaphysicians dream up.” And my rejoinder is, “I don’t see any reason to believe that there are any things with the combination of properties you assign to ‘states.’ It looks to me as if the very idea of a thing that has those properties makes no sense. All the stuff you say about or in terms of ‘states’ looks to me as if it’s *not even wrong*.” (A closely related point: don’t get me started on the radical ontological – and even logical – confusions that infect what philosophers of mind say when they start talking about “qualia.”)

My second example is the psychological continuity theory of personal identity. But I have had a great deal to say about this subject already. I refer the interested reader to my essay, “Materialism and the Psychological Continuity Account of Personal Identity” (*Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 11: *Mind, Causation, and World* (1997), pp. 305–319).

## 6

### **Miroslaw Szatkowski:**

*Let me quote one passage:*

Peter van Inwagen is one of the most eminent and influential Christian philosophers in the world today. His work in metaphysics and philosophy of religion is cited and taught very widely and he is a frequently invited speaker at conferences in many countries. He writes with clarity and power, and his views have helped to shape the thinking of a whole generation of philosophers. In all this work, his Christian convictions shine through. In an age when many are happy to dissemble either their adherence to Christianity or some part of their Christian convictions, Van Inwagen has been exemplary in his courage and his witness to his faith. He is widely honored for his intellectual gifts, but they are certainly matched by his integrity and his fidelity to the faith. Without doubt, he is an exemplar of what a Christian philosopher should be.

### **Peter van Inwagen:**

I blush – and pray to be delivered from the spiritual danger in which reading such statements places a Christian philosopher or theologian. (“What doth it profit thee to enter into deep discussion concerning the Holy Trinity if thou lackest humility and art thus displeasing to the Trinity?” – Thomas à Kempis.)

## 7

### **Miroslaw Szatkowski:**

In your works you have also addressed the issues of the existence of God and His attributes. Do theoretical considerations influence your actions in life?

**Peter van Inwagen:**

Perhaps theoretical considerations in moral philosophy and revealed theology have influenced my “actions in life”. I do not believe that theoretical considerations in metaphysics have – or at any rate, only in the sense that theoretical considerations in metaphysics may have helped me to see the flaws in certain widespread arguments for the falsity of various theological propositions that are essential to the Christian faith.

**8****Miroslaw Szatkowski:**

How do you assess the value of proofs for the existence of God, especially the ontological ones or those by Thomas Aquinas? Why do you consider yourself an analytical philosopher instead of a Thomist? How do you assess Thomism – its advantages and disadvantages – from this external perspective?

**Peter van Inwagen:**

I will say first that I think that no philosophical argument whose conclusion is a positive, substantive proposition – and the proposition that God exists is a positive, substantive proposition if any proposition is – need convince those who perfectly understand it that its conclusion is true. I do believe that some versions of the cosmological argument are as good as any philosophical argument I’ve ever seen – and I would make almost as strong a statement about some versions of the design argument. But I am convinced that someone of high intelligence and unexceptionable intellectual honesty could understand these arguments perfectly and nevertheless reject their conclusions – and not thereby convict himself or herself of irrationality.

I would say, moreover, that none of the traditional “arguments for the existence of God” – valid or invalid, sound or unsound – really is an argument for the existence of God. Perhaps I can make the reason why I say this clear by considering the conclusion of the version of the cosmological argument that I like best; its conclusion is that there is at least one metaphysically necessary being, and that all metaphysically contingent beings depend for their existence on one or more of these necessary beings. And an atheist could accept that conclusion. (Not happily, perhaps, but certainly consistently.) Even the conclusions of the various versions of the ontological argument cannot really be read as affirmations of the existence of God. There exists *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*; well and good. But does

*God* exist? There exists *ens summe perfectum*; well and good. But does *God* exist? Christopher Hughes has told me that, in his view, if there were a being to which either of these phrases applied, that being would be something very much like the neo-Platonic One<sup>6</sup> – and the One is certainly not *God*. The One is certainly *not at all like God*.

One might demonstrate the existence of *God* by supplementing the ontological argument with a proof that that a “something than which no greater can be conceived” or a “supremely perfect being” would have all the “divine attributes” (whatever attributes a definitive list of the divine attributes might comprise, it would certainly contain personality, an attribute that the One conspicuously lacks). Any it is very doubtful whether such a proof is possible: any argument for the conclusion that a supremely perfect being would have all the divine attributes, I think, would have premises that essentially assumed the point at issue – ‘Personality is a perfection’, for example.

In any case, every known version of the ontological argument is irremediably defective – although the various versions of the argument are defective for different reasons.<sup>7</sup>

The question, “Why do you consider yourself an analytical philosopher instead of a Thomist?” suggests that there is some sort of incompatibility between being an analytical philosopher and being a Thomist. I find this a very puzzling suggestion, for Thomas was himself an analytical philosopher – as were, e.g., Democritus and Aristotle and Descartes. (Consider Thomas and Carnap. Although their philosophical *positions* could hardly have been more different, Thomas’s way of thinking about a philosophical question and Carnap’s way of thinking about a philosophical question are *far* more similar to each other than either is to any way of thinking that is displayed in the writings of Plotinus, Meister Eckhart, Pico della Mirandola, Fichte, Hegel, Bergson, Santayana, Croce, Ortega y Gasset, Heidegger, Sartre, or Derrida).

There are, of course, current “schools” of philosophy, one of them represented by what goes on in classes and seminars and lectures at the Gregorian University, the University of Louvain, the Institut Catholique de Paris, and the

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase ‘if there were a being ...’ suggests a difficulty with Hughes’s conviction: if there were a being to which these phrases applied, it would, of course be, and neo-Platonists hold that the One is somehow “beyond being”.

<sup>7</sup> See my essays, “Some Remarks on the Modal Ontological Argument,” in Matthias Lutz-Bachman and Thomas M. Schmidt (eds.) *Metaphysik heute: Probleme und Perspektiven der Ontologie* (Freiburg and Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 2007), pp. 132–145 and “Three Versions of the Ontological Argument” in Miroslaw Szatkowski (ed), *Ontological Proofs Today*, (Heusenstamm: Ontos Verlag, 2012, pp. 143–162.

Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies – and another by what goes on in classes and seminars and lectures at Oxford University, Princeton University, New York University, and Rutgers University. But the “gap” between these “schools” is more a result of history and tradition (and perhaps of the explicit theological – or atheological – commitments of their members) than of any disagreement about what philosophy is or how it should be “done.” And there have been attempts to bridge the gap between the Thomism(s) of the present day and analytical philosophy in the narrow sense (the analytical philosophy of Princeton and Oxford). There is, after all, such a thing as “analytical Thomism” – a term that was, I believe, coined by John Haldane. I am not in a position to provide a list of philosophers who “self-identify” as analytical Thomists, but I think it is plausible to describe the following philosophers as analytical Thomists: Haldane himself, Norman Kretzmann, Cyrille Michon, Roger Puivet, John O’Callaghan, Eleonore Stump, and Mark Murphy.

If I am not a Thomist, this is not because I am an analytical philosopher but because I am a Platonist (or at any rate a “platonist”). Whatever other positions they may hold, Thomists must hold that a human being has as a constituent a substantial form. And the substantial form of Socrates, could not possibly be, or have been, the form of anyone or anything else: anything of which it is the substantial form *must* be Socrates. Consider, for example, Hilary Putnam’s thought-experiments involving “Twin Earth”. Suppose Twin Earth actually exists. (We are not to include Putnam’s stipulation that where there is H<sub>2</sub>O on Earth, there is at the corresponding place on Twin Earth a superficially similar stuff with the fictional chemical formula ‘XYZ’ in our description of Twin Earth: water on *our* Twin Earth is just water.) We have, then, Socrates on Earth and Twin-Socrates on Twin Earth. Thomists maintain that the substantial form of Socrates and the substantial form of Twin Socrates are numerically distinct ... well, let’s say, numerically distinct *items*. Platonists like myself, however, deny that there is anything that could be called a form of Socrates that is not common to him and to Twin Socrates. There are no doubt many ways to understand expressions like ‘the form of Socrates’ and ‘the form of Twin Socrates’, but, however we understand them, whatever precise meaning we give to the operator ‘the form of the substance *x*’, these two expressions must denote the same thing if they denote anything – a transcendent universal, a universal *ante res*, an item that is in no sense a constituent of either of the two men, a single form in which they both “participate.”

In the same vein, a Platonist cannot countenance “individual accidents.” Suppose that at mass I observe the celebrant holding a piece of bread. When I look at the bread, Thomas tells us, I do not see the bread – not really, not literally. That is, I do not see the “substance” of the bread. I see only the accidents of the bread: if I see the bread, I see it only vicariously; I see it by seeing (without quali-

fication) its accidents. The priest speaks the words (or some vernacular equivalent of the words), “*Hic est corpus meum*” (with, of course, the intention of doing what priests of the Church have always done in speaking these words at that point in the mass) and the bread – the substance of the bread – is no longer “there”; what is now there is not bread but flesh. The accidents of the bread, however, remain. I see no change in what is in the priest’s hand simply because I see there what I saw before those words were spoken, the accidents of the bread. And what is true of sight is true of the other senses: “taste and touch and vision to discern thee fail”.

Although no one is a more zealous adherent of the doctrine of the Real Presence than I, I cannot accept Thomas’s explanation of what occurs at the moment of Consecration. And my reason for being unable to accept it is not theological but metaphysical – or perhaps one might even say semantical: I can attach no sense to the words ‘individual accident’. I am sometimes asked by my Roman Catholic colleagues at the University of Notre Dame (they know I am an Anglican) whether I believe in “transubstantiation”. I ask my interlocutors what they mean by the word. They often respond by saying something like, “We mean by it what Aquinas meant by it.” And I reply, “I don’t even understand what he says about the unconsecrated bread.”

## 9

### **Mirosław Szatkowski:**

Are there any other questions you would like to answer?

### **Peter van Inwagen:**

Oh, eight is a very nice number. If eight Beatitudes sufficed for our Lord, eight questions will suffice for me.