In Defense of Provisional Axioms in Metaphysics

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Abstract

This paper develops a framework termed methodological functionalism to address the infinite regress problem inherent in metaphysical justification. Whenever one attempts to justify a metaphysical claim, each justification calls for a further one, yielding an endless regress. Traditional responses either posit self-evident axioms or accept infinite chains of reasoning. The present account offers a pragmatic synthesis: philosophers halt their inquiry when doing so becomes functionally adequate—a decision formalised through what I call the z principle ('if it works, it works'). This halting point is not an ultimate metaphysical ground but a provisional terminus guided by epistemic humility. Central to this framework is the concept of recalcitrant facts, adapted from Quine's notion of 'recalcitrant experience'. These emergent facts, arising from a reality in flux, resist established metaphysical systems and compel their revision or abandonment. When a metaphysical position encounters such facts, it loses its functional adequacy, prompting reevaluation. This renders methodological functionalism both descriptive—depicting how philosophers implicitly operate—and prescriptive—providing criteria for when metaphysical inquiry should stop. The paper situates this model within a lineage extending from Russell's 'primitive propositions' and Chalmers's 'constructing the world' to Nietzsche's will to power, showing that metaphysical reasoning always ceases where its functional and existential purposes are fulfilled. Rather than seeking the final metaphysical truth, this framework clarifies how metaphysical systems evolve, collapse, or endure under the pressure of reality's resistance. It proposes that philosophy's strength lies not in attaining certainty but in its capacity for self-correction through humility before the transcendent.

Keywords: Epistemic Humility, Metaphysical Justification, Methodological Functionalism, Recalcitrant Facts

I

Philosophy as a discipline has transformed since the time when the subject matter of metaphysics was constrained to topics such as necessity, causation, and being-as-such. In modern interpretations, metaphysics has come to mean something much broader—for instance, even a theory denying the existence of metaphysics is, by its very nature, a metaphysical position.[1] This new understanding of metaphysics yields a number of obstacles that the philosopher must now face. For instance, it has become easier for the philosophically inclined to intuit what metaphysics is than to express it in language. When the linguistic project is attempted, it leads us to the edge of a particularly thin line, beyond which lie things that resist expression, even through language.[2] Another problem demanding caution is that anything said about metaphysics is itself metaphysical, and any justification given for a particular metaphysics is itself metaphysical. The question then becomes: what justifies the justification of that metaphysics? Armchair investigations often bear no fruit.[3] Yet this very lack of conclusion forms a conclusion: that we are caught in an infinite regress of metaphysical justifications, each resting on deeper metaphysical positions. If the earlier claim about the nature of metaphysics being implacable holds true, then this regress is inescapable. For everything is metaphysics. When, then, does one stop?

The *everything is metaphysics* resembles a classic infinite regress problem. Traditionally, there are two solutions to any infinite regress problem (Aikin, 2018).

1. One can establish a foundation in the form of an *axiomatic truth*, which is taken to be true without the need for further proof.

2. One can accept an *infinite chain* of justifications, provided it is free from circularity.

By definition, infinity has no starting or ending point. Sometimes it can have a defined starting point but no endpoint. In cases of philosophical justification, if proposition P_a is justified by P_1, and that by P_n, and so on, the infinite regress may have the starting point of P_1 but no possible endpoint. Let us call this line of propositions being justified by further propositions together a philosophical *chain of reasoning*. I am empathetic to the idea that all chains require a certain foundation. The foundation need not even be the ultimate first cause, as the term appears in arguments in favour of god. I'm leaning more in favour of the first solution than the second though it definitely tends to bleed

[1] See Lowe (2002).

[2] This work attempts to dwell on that fine line, and to speak only of that which can be spoken of. Such things are, as will be argued later, *representations*.

[3] If this were the sciences, such armchair thinking might be condemned. But as philosophers, this is indeed the best laboratory for probing the structures of reality.

into the artistic domain—however that, too, is a distinctive way of philosophising in its own place. Nonetheless, I would like to view the second solution itself as also another axiom—we do, after all, in light of our incapacities of measuring Infinity, simply accept that infinity is infinite. This move itself is a move of the first solution; we merely establish that infinite chains should be accepted with no primordial foundation, and that itself becomes the primordial foundation. This gives strength to the idea that axiomatic assumptions are inevitable and cannot be skipped.

If this is granted, if axioms are ultimately unavoidable, why not simply take a straight path and adhere to the first solution? That is, if something is truly justified by an infinite number of propositions, we may investigate this chain until we find a proposition we can settle for and call it the fundamental building block of the chain. We shall therefore settle for solution *i)* to any traditional regression problem; we will take shelter in certain foundations represented as propositions of *primitive concepts*. In light of solution *i)*, I will now consider a formalised antidote to the regress problem—my argued antidote is called *methodological functionalism*, and it also forms the primary thesis of this paper.

My primary claim is of the following—in a chain of philosophical reasoning, where one proposition containing metaphysical content is justified by another, one stops when it is functionally pragmatic to do so (let's call it z: "if it works, it works," for now). This z itself is metaphysical, but it can answer to its own self-recursion: so if one asks, "If z is true, then what is the metaphysical justification of z?"—as an answer, one can go down this rabbit hole and stop whenever it is functional to do so. If z is justified by z_1, one may go as far as z_n, to the extent that it does not lead them to any inconsistencies in life; if *z: if it works, it works.* works, then *z* works, and if it doesn't, then drop it. To codify when it doesn't work, I introduce yet another neologism called *recalcitrant facts*. This is a self-founding framework that both *explains* when the regress comes to an end and at the same time *prescribes* when a chain can come to an end. So the model is both *methodological* and also *descriptive*—as far as the latter characterisation is concerned, I will argue that philosophers implicitly employ this model even when they are not aware of it.

II

Recalcitrant Facts

Metaphysical positions are subject to a continuous flux of change. This would align with a particular philosophy of science, which holds that reality itself is always changing—never constant, and always in a process of becoming (Marburger, 2011). How

can our functionalist theory fit into the battleground of metaphysical positions and the revelatory nature of reality that challenges such metaphysics? I hold the *becoming* nature of reality as true and argue that metaphysical positions, composed of certain claims—further represented in propositions—are derived inductively from facts available in the world or reality. And if reality is in flux, then so are facts, for reality is all that is the case. Then all metaphysical positions based on these changing facts are open to potential challenges. When a certain emergent fact challenges an established metaphysical position, it is a *recalcitrant fact* to everything that position stands for. The functionalist z principle then acts as a formalised description of the process whereby philosophers are led to change their metaphysical positions in light of recalcitrant-facts.

My use of the term *'recalcitrant fact'* is deliberately founded upon W.V.O. Quine's epistemological concept of "recalcitrant experience." In Quine's holistic framework, our beliefs form an interconnected web, where empirical observations test the system as a whole (Quine, 1951). A recalcitrant experience is one that, "does not square with our expectations", creating a logical conflict that forces a revision somewhere in the web. While Quine noted we often prefer to revise peripheral beliefs, he famously argued that no belief is immune from revision—not even the core principles of metaphysics or logic. My argument applies this same logic: I posit that a *recalcitrant fact* is an emergent datum from a reality-in-flux, and its appearance puts this same Quinean pressure on our established metaphysical positions, forcing them to adapt or be discarded.

In light of our model, we must analyse few of its component. For one, in any metaphysical chain of reasoning, we have recalcitrant facts which render the chain for review and change. But prior to that, any chain is founded upon a base. This base, or starting point, will be required even if a recalcitrant fact were to call the entire chain for change.

Primordial Facts and Axiomatic Bases in Metaphysical Chains of Reasoning

Axiomatic systems in logic and mathematics are a testimony to a fundamental property of propositional inferences: that not all true propositions can be reasoned (or proved) by further true propositions. Unless one wants to fiddle in an infinite regress, one has to succumb to certain foundations. Axiomatic propositions are propositions that are assumed to be true, and certain other true propositions depend upon these *foundations* to be proven. Russell, in his 'Philosophical Essays' (1910), extends this framework from logic and mathematics and argues that it applies equally well to propositions of virtually any theoretical enterprise, including the ethical domain.[4] For him, there are

[4]Russell's applying of axiomatic principles to ethics is based upon his argument in the first essay in the said work, where he argues that it is a wrong approach to consider ethics and sciences as belonging to

certain propositions involving concepts such as 'Good' and 'Red' that can neither be divided nor analysed further into even smaller constituents.

Similar concepts, including Russell's as just discussed, are traced in David Chalmers' work titled 'Constructing the World' (2012), where the author pictures the historical progressions of attempts to build an ontology of the world-as-such[5] using what he calls, are *primitive concepts*. Russell's example of what is morally good, or what is red, involves atomic propositions which arouse such primitive concepts; defined by their property of forming part of other concepts, but that they themselves cannot be defined by even anything smaller or more primitive.

Interestingly, for there to be a primitive concept in any philosophical chain reflects a methodological functionalist system. That is, for there to be a primitive base, one has to penetrate into the particular matter. Upon investigation, philosophers arrive at fundamental truths of that problem which cannot be divided further. This terminal point, is the point where the basic truths that compose their metaphysical theory cannot themselves be further divided. Primitive concepts are points where philosophers feel inclined to stop (owing to an inherent functional fulfilment, whether implicit or explicit). Let us generalise this, and hold that:-

> For any philosophy Ph developed by a particular philosopher or group of philosophers (let us call these entities philosophical agent) Pa, wherever the philosophy stops without attempting to justify its developed chain of justifications any further, is its terminal point, and what constitutes the terminal point is a primitive concept represented using atomic propositions.

Where,

> *Primitive Concept:* A concept that functions as a foundational constituent in a system of thought, characterized by its resistance to further analysis or decomposition into simpler components. Primitive concepts form a conceptual base from which other truths can be constructed.

separate domains; whereas ethics is actually about true propositions of the 'ought kind', which he holds to be no different than true propositions of the sciences. Thus, the subject matter of ethics is a theoretical enterprise about practice, and is not itself practice, no more than botany is itself plants, or zoology animals. Owing to this, all theoretical domains rest on certain axiomatic propositions, and ethics, then, is not exempt from this characteristic feature.

[5]The 'world as such' refers to any attempt to philosophically describe the ontology of the world. There could be different ways such an attempt is made. For instance, some from the scientific-realist frontier, some from the idealist frontier, and etc. Each ontological conception of the world, irrespective of the specificity of how it is arranged, ultimately relies upon primitive concepts. But what constitutes primitive for one metaphysical view might not be the same for another; reductionist materialists may not agree with idealists on primitive concepts, for example.

Terminal Point: The *end point* of inferential reasoning where further analysis is implausible, containing what are, by definition, primitive concepts. This point is something functionally ultimate and need not represent the ultimate metaphysical terminal point.

Methodological Functionalism represents this entire process of finding the terminal point in a chain of metaphysical justifications, how such a point comes about, and how such a point is thwarted in the presence of a recalcitrant fact, aligned and represented in the wake of the z principle. However, upon the presence of the recalcitrant fact that contradicts or opposes the metaphysical view, the chain and its held primitive concept may be called upon for review and change. While what we have done has given this process a formalised description, this method is not a novel creation. Instead, I observe this to be an implicit process already prominent in many philosophical works.

The most profound thesis in our favour actually comes from Nietzsche's 'Beyond Good and Evil' (1886) where he argues that implicit in all philosophers' attempt to speak the truth, is a vicious desire or a will to power. In Nietzsche, the will to power essentially involves a claim to the world in the wake of how the self has philosophised it. Even if the purported metaphysical philosophy in question (Ph), in regard to its Pa, is very far reduced from the stench of personal ownership and is something abstract, impersonal and universally applicable—Nietzsche holds, as I interpret it, that such a metaphysics is, nevertheless, still imposed upon the world through the agent (Pa). To that extent, the Pa is invested in a power-play of seeing his metaphysics bloom and be accepted as things that are true. This is the hidden will to power, implicit in all acclaimed will to the supposed objective and impersonal truth. The disinterestedness towards will to truth does not exist for Nietzsche, for all will to truth is essentially an interested will to power.

I hold that inherent to the will to power is also a methodological functionalist motive: it serves a function for the agent. The philosopher stops when he feels the will to power sufficiently satisfied and the functional goal served. In light of the regress problem of metaphysical justifications, it would seem that philosophers' justifications for their previous justification of their previous justification, and so on, stop when they reach a point of insoluble defence. Where they stop is where they feel their philosophy reflects the truth of the world, that is, that their philosophy gives a functional output and cannot be further analysed. This Nietzsche-ian insight gives substance to the idea that all philosophies stop at some point, and whatever point that might be, we can define it as being primitive for that particular philosophy.

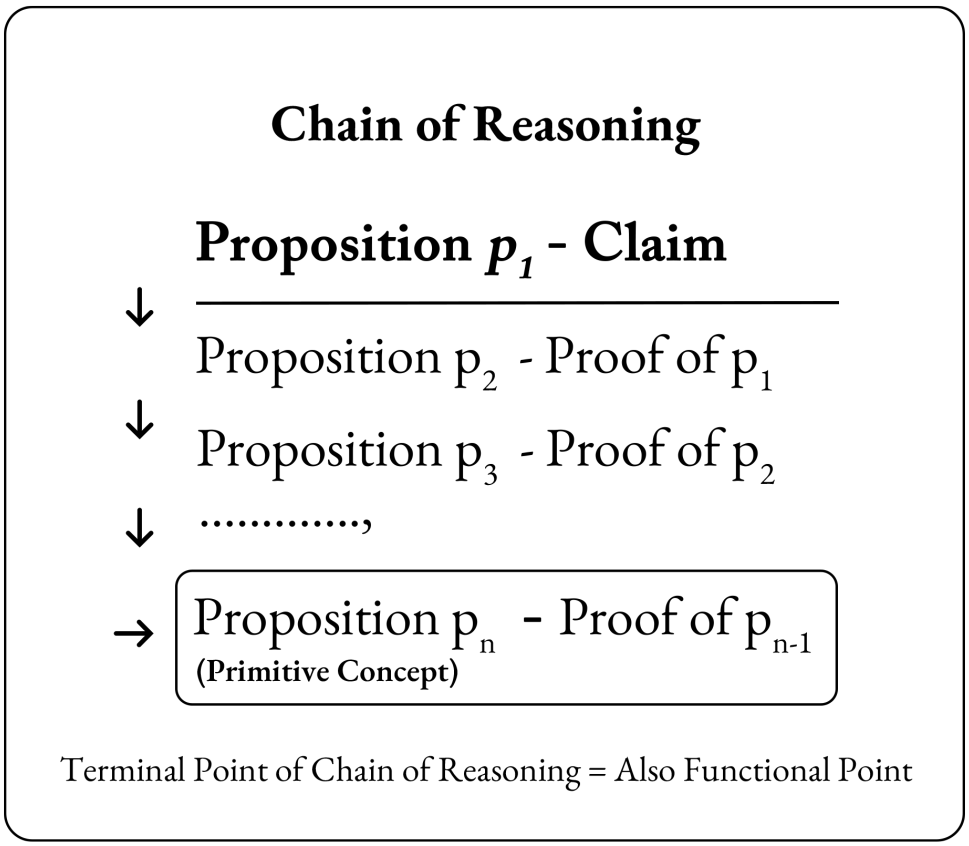


Figure 1: Illustration of the terminal point where chain of reasoning halts and the end proposition is assumed as an axiom upon which further propositions are proved.

Epistemic Inaccessibility to True Metaphysical Terminal Points

Concepts such as Russell's 'good', 'red' and Chalmers' 'conscious experience' are treated as the terminal points within the context of their frameworks; while they define other concepts, they themselves remain undefinable. A central question of epistemic accessibility then arises: are these concepts (in the context of the frameworks or philosophies to which they are a constituent):

(a) metaphysically ultimate, or

(b) do they simply represent the current limits of our analysis? (at that given point, no deeper primitives than the discovered terminal point are accessible to the reasoning agent)

I take the answer to *(b)* as affirmative, while I remain partially agnostic towards *(a)* and hold a position of epistemic humility. I hold that *(a)* is unknowable.

There is the possibility that primitive concepts in certain philosophies, which form their termination point, are, after all, the true and actual end-point—one where the investigation of reality itself necessarily cannot find continuation. For example, consider the following metaphysical position:

> All humans move in pursuit of pleasure.
> Pleasure is good.

Here, the question arises: what is *good*? As Russell holds, *good* is a primitive and cannot be further defined. Thus, the metaphysical statement that pleasure is good is held axiomatically, without further probing. Whether the claim that pleasure is good truly reflects a terminal point in reality is not knowable. There could always be something even deeper than *good* that might be employed to explain it. One objection might be that, across all the years of civilisational development, we have yet to find something more primitive than *good*. Therefore, one might claim, it is the ultimate terminal point of this specific aspect of reality as represented by this metaphysical framework. However, this too is problematic, and one could invoke the Humean problem of induction: just because good has not yet been found to have something deeper that can explain it, does not mean it will continue to remain uncontested. We therefore cannot have access to knowledge that confirms the metaphysical ultimacy of a terminal point. Such a point is something transcendent. Even if a particular philosophy's terminal point ends up reflecting the actual end-point of the states of affairs it concerns, this would merely be an accidental result. The methodological functionalist can take two operative actions based on a particular chain of reasoning:

- Assume that the held terminal point is only provisional and may or may not reflect the true terminal point.
- Assume that the held terminal point is in-fact also the true terminal point.

It does not seem reasonable to hold the second position—as its scope is much stronger, while simultaneously lacking in the capacity to confirm the truth of its held assumption. In acknowledgement of our epistemic limits, and owing to an orientation of epistemic humility, the first option seems the most favourable; we remain open to the possibility that provisionally held terminal points may in actuality contain even deeper terminal points not yet available to the Pa. Indeed, one could very well be situated in what is possibly an infinite sequence, where each metaphysical claim is grounded upon deeper, more foundational metaphysical positions or primitive concepts.

Nonetheless, philosophers take for granted that the point where they stop is indeed the promised land, only to sometimes be upped by their posterity who advance the previous philosophy, or refute it altogether. There are also contrary cases where philosophies are not advanced or refuted in light of better theories, but simply abandoned. Afred N. Whitehead famously said that *a philosophy is not refuted; it is simply abandoned.* (1929). This reflects the idea that all recalcitrant facts need not be presented in the form of refutations, and sometimes philosophies are simply abandoned as they run *out of fashion.* Such abandonment will reflect that the philosophy was inapt in being relevant to the current states of affairs of the perceived world, and the recalcitrant facts were there but no one ever bothered to present them formally in a systematic theory.

Despite the possibility of *(a)*, the practice of provisionally holding a primitive concept with full acknowledge of our epistemic limits (that is *(b)*) is not entirely detrimental. Methodological Functionalism is methodological to the extent that it prescribes a tool for to know when a certain chain of metaphysical reasoning in pursuit of deeper justifications can come to a halt. However, simultaneously it is a descriptive framework that describes a practice that philosophers already partake, as made apparent by the will to power argument.

Humility in Wake of the Transcendent

Let us now observe the utility of assuming *(b)* despite the possibility of *(a)*.

> *Epistemic Humility:* A philosophical attitude or stance that acknowledges the inherent limitations of one's knowledge and the possibility of error in even the most well-reasoned beliefs. It resists claims of absolute certainty,

especially in domains where evidence is incomplete, inaccessible, or fundamentally constrained by cognitive or metaphysical boundaries.

It was, famously, Socrates who was attributed with such humility; in all recorded Platonic dialogues, no investigation ever led to a conclusive answer. Philosophy, conceived as *philosophia*—a love for wisdom—was not itself wisdom. All quests for definitions led Socrates nowhere, and almost all attempted answers never fully explained the object in question. One criticism of the Socratic method might be that it is too pretentious; it wittily moves around a subject without directly addressing the hard problems.

Science, on the other hand, is quite minimalistic. It does away with pretension and is as direct in its explanations as the framework allows. Graham Harman believes that pretension is one of the professional risks in the arts and humanities. Unlike scientific enterprises, one cannot replace names for things with descriptions of them. In science, for instance, one might replace what an electron is with all the true propositions describing it—until perhaps no further true propositions remain (though such a point is to be doubted, as science is perpetually undergoing change and revision). However, a work of art cannot be exhausted by mere descriptions. No painting can be explained away by noting how the artist stroked the brush or which pigments were used to craft it. I am in agreement with Harman.

Let us now apply epistemic humility, as methodological functionalists, to a case example. Imagine the case of knowing the universe. We do not know whether it is finite but expanding infinitely, infinite and also expanding infinitely, or finite and expanding finitely. What we do know is that it is so vastly ginormous that it is unaccountable. For our functional purposes, all of these accounts are equivalent. This is not to deny that there are metaphysically significant consequences depending on whether the universe is finite or infinite, but such knowledge is not yet obtained. Whether it is finite yet too vast to be accounted for, or infinite and thus unaccountable, the *functional output*—that it cannot be accounted for—remains the same, irrespective of its initial conditions. Similarly, whether the terminal point in a metaphysical chain of reasoning is truly the end of the chain or not is unavailable to us. We must settle for functional and possibly contingent terminal points, subject to change with the unfolding of the world. An application of epistemic humility, here, protects us from the inherent limitations posed by transcendent truths.

Conclusion

One might ask: why presume the possibility of transcendent truths in the first place? My answer is as follows: given our epistemic inaccessibility, it is most functional to give the benefit of the doubt to those objects of knowledge that are epistemically inaccessible and thereby transcendent, rather than to deny their existence altogether. Epistemic humility may not be sufficient to prove genuine metaphysical truths—such as whether the universe is truly infinite or finite—but in acknowledging our limitations, it provides a ground upon which we might move towards such transcendent truths, and perhaps even have them revealed to us someday. The strength of this project lies not in its capacity to provide infallible answers, but in its acknowledgement of ontological limitations.

Possible Criticisms

1. If all metaphysical positions are to be judged in their own context, based on some arbitrary rules of what counts as functional, then how do we stop all contrasting and contradicting metaphysical positions from remaining?

Indeed, this theory cannot help one determine the true metaphysical position from a number of options. What this theory describes is a procedural framework that formally represents adoption and discarding of metaphysical claims; in the presence of a *recalcitrant fact*. I argue that any good metaphysical theory (this extends to this framework as well) needs to give the grounds on which it can be disproven. In that manner, this may mean an individual needs to adopt one metaphysical framework, work with it till it stops working (if at all), and then move onto a new framework, and see if that works.

This theory has its utility in describing how different metaphysical positions come to contest: it discovers the nature of the inductive leap from facts to metaphysical claims, and the role of recalcitrant facts in thwarting such claims. It should be noted, that interestingly, what counts as a recalcitrant fact varies according to the rules set by the M itself. Often, this leads to impossible cases, where no matter what, a position M refuses to accept any recalcitrant facts. Such M can be argued to be *bad* positions, against good ones—within the context of our framework.

2. Your argument that *z: if it works, it works*–that one stops probing into deeper levels of justifications in a chain of reasoning is when it is functional to do so, relies on itself to justify itself. You are forming a circular argument.

Yes, but this is to elucidate my main point: It describes a metaphysics of how to function with metaphysical claims: to stop when the claims encounter recalcitrant fact,

and the position at large stops being functional. For example, when one finds that the z *principle*: If it works, it works is no longer working, simply abandon this position. This, is my identified criterion for what counts as a valid metaphysical theory–its strength lies not in universal scope and impossibility of being falsified[6], but that it is a way of interpreting this world, and at the same time providing the grounds on which it can be proven wrong. It is not circular if the point of termination is defined.

3. This theory justifies any morally abhorrent individual with a very immoral metaphysical position to continue on with their beliefs.

It is worth examining the metaphysical predisposition underlying this very objection: the critique presupposes a particular ethical philosophy, say *E*, which holds that metaphysical theories must not encourage or support immoral acts. It a priori assumes that metaphysical claims are, or ought to be, morally constrained—i.e., that moral philosophies are inherently superior to those which might permit or support immoral orientations. Our framework however, does not make a case for providing moral prescriptions. In relation to a particular metaphysical position M. The stated objection is predicated upon a fallacious notion. That is, one cannot justify an *M* by appealing to an *ethical principle or prerogative*. The transition from a metaphysical position M to an ethical principle, is problematic; this was also the primary argument of ***Hume's Guillotine***). And conversely, the transitions of E (ethical propositions) to M is similarly problematic.[7]

I do not maintain that my theory is immoral in scope. If anything, it may be considered neutral: it attempts to lay out a structure or picture, irrespective of what constitutes the picture itself. Owing to Hume's Guillotine and Transmission Failure Problems, defending the morality of the theory is not of consequence to our framework, as the criticism itself is based on certain morally charged *apriori* assumptions. Until such assumptions can be overcome, the critic is in no better position to be doing the criticism.

4. How does this theory survive the many anti-metaphysical views that metaphysical claims are devoid of meaning?[8]

[6] See Flew (1944)

[7] See (Impagnatiello, 2024)

[8] A historical analysis of modern and postmodern philosophy reveals a stringent stench of disapproval, and even outright denial of metaphysics. Logical positivism (and its eventual impact in the analytic tradition), phenomenology (mostly the Husserlian strains), and continental deconstructionism are examples of a few schools that are existentially critical of the meaningfulness of metaphysics. The arguments are of the following kind: the non-verifiability of metaphysical claims (Ayer, 2012), their nonsensical logical form—they can only be shown, and not spoken of (Wittgenstein, 1922) status as arriving due

Philosophy progresses in a non-linear, steady pace through recursive exploration. Foundational disputes—in this case, the status of metaphysical sensibility—haunt the philosopher even in the postmodern age. Plato, for instance, despite writing millennia ago, remains a live source for contemporary metaphysical and ethical speculation. This persistence suggests a central feature of philosophical discourse: its *resistance to final closure*. Unlike scientific theories, which are often replaced or refuted, philosophical positions remain available for revival and rearticulation.

In this spirit, the present work proceeds by taking metaphysics as meaningful, not by proving its legitimacy, but by assuming its significance as a working premise. In doing so, it acknowledges that this foundation is conditional. Should it one day be proven, beyond serious philosophical contestation, that metaphysics is indeed meaningless, the current argument would lose its ground. However, the conditional acceptance is out of epistemic humility, as has been so far explored. Universal statements involving all of space and time have epistemic problems. Applying this very reasoning to our own theory, it is said that I cannot myself argue that metaphysics can never be proven to be meaningless. My own belief, however, is that metaphysics cannot be counted as meaningless. And even if such an objection were indeed true, stubborn philosophers would find ways to elaborate the metaphysics of such meaningless as well.

In some ways, we have come full circle to our initial two solutions to the infinite regress problem. As it seems, we are opting to remain humble about ultimate metaphysical realities—that the true reality might indeed be an infinite chain (this aligns with our second proposed solution in the introduction). However, in light of our incapacities, we provisionally adopt axiomatic foundations (the first solution).

to linguistic confusion (Russell, 1918), their suspension in the phenomenological epoché or experience (Husserl, 1913), or their position as deceptions awaiting de- construction within the parameters of language (Derrida, 1967). In the face of these dilapidating positions, a despondent attitude is common for the pursuer of metaphysics. However, I propose an antidote, and a way about this particular difficulty, and it is rooted in the understanding that philosophy does not discard its past (in a way that sciences do, for example).

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