Lost at Sea: A New Route to Metaphysical Skepticism

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Global metaphysical skepticism is the view that we have no knowledge of any substantive metaphysical thesis. Various reasons have been provided in support of global metaphysical skepticism. Most centrally: a suspicion of the synthetic a priori, an inevitable conflict between common sense and any fleshed-out metaphysical theory, and the relentless persistence of metaphysical disagreement.[1] I provide a new reason.

1 Parable

First, a parable. Say you're a medieval retiree looking to live out the rest of your days on a secluded island. Naturally, you'd like to find the one that's best for you. You immediately narrow things down to the islands with good reputations. Luckily, you can complete a tour of these islands in under three years.

The trouble, however, is this. The candidate islands are very far apart and very different. They're so far apart, in fact, that by the time you finish your journey from one island to the next, you can't remember what it was like to be on any of the islands you previously visited. (Remember, you're medieval, so these journeys take a while.) All you have is the list of positive features you jotted down when you were there. And the islands are so different, in fact, that you can't simply compare their respective features to come to a reasonable all-things-considered judgment of overall bestness: One island is covered in rainforest, with a rich collection of mosses, orchids, and towering koa trees; another is sunny, airy, and covered in beautiful white sand; another has trees filled with luscious fruits and beautiful bubbling brooks; and so on for the other candidate islands.

Given the vast geographic and qualitative distance between them, there seems to be no way for you reasonably to determine which island is best for you, or even reasonably to determine for any given candidate island that it *isn't* best for you. Indeed, given the latter fact, there seems to be no way for you reasonably to determine that it's best for you to reside on an island with koa trees, or white sand, or bubbling brooks, or whatnot: no such feature is shared by all the islands, and you have no reasonable way of ruling out as best any of the islands that lack

[1] For a suspicion of what would come to be known as the synthetic a priori, see Hume [1998, §12.3]; for a discussion of the inevitable conflict between common sense and any fleshed-out metaphysical theory (with a focus on the metaphysics of mind), see Schwitzgebel [2014]; for a discussion of the relentless persistence of metaphysical disagreement (especially among experts), see, inter alia, Van Inwagen [2004], Frances [2005], Van Inwagen [2009], Kornblith [2013], and Nolan [2016]. Some of these reasons are sometimes offered in favor of an even more global skepticism–extending beyond metaphysics into other areas of philosophy and sometimes even beyond philosophy. (Indeed, Bennett [2016] argues that there are no special or distinctive problems—epistemological or otherwise—with metaphysics.) For a discussion of the scope of *my* argument, see §6.

Note: I set aside here those reasons that purport to show that there are no true substantive metaphysical theses to be known.

it. Since the features come together as packages, there is no way reasonably to judge of any feature that it's best for you to retire on an island that has *it*.

Knowledge of substantive metaphysical theses is relevantly like reasonable judgment of best-island-making features. Neither is to be had, and for the same kind of reason. Metaphysical theses come together as packages. Such packages are very different from each other. Because the packages are so different, we cannot know of any one of the packages that it isn't true. And because we cannot know of any one of them that it isn't true, and there is no substantive metaphysical thesis on which they all agree, we cannot know any substantive metaphysical thesis at all. To put all this more carefully and explicitly, we need some stage-setting.

2 Setting the Stage

Grand metaphysical theories (GMTs), as I shall use the term, are absolutely comprehensive metaphysical systems. Each is a set of theses that settles every metaphysical issue.[2] In particular, for every substantive metaphysical thesis, either that thesis or its negation is one of the set's members.[3] Here's a sample of metaphysical issues that every GMT addresses: Are there any things? Are there abstract things? Does time flow? Is space substantival? And here's a corresponding sample of metaphysical theses that some GMTs have as members: there are things; there are no abstract things; time does not flow; space is substantival. Each GMT addresses each of these metaphysical issues, along with all the rest. Call the space of all GMTs *the metaphysical ocean*. It has as many dimensions as there are substantive metaphysical theses. Of course, many GMTs are logically inconsistent, that is, it's possible to derive a contradiction from its members through logic alone. For instance, any GMT that has as members an answer of "There are no things'' to the question "Are they any things?'' and an answer of "There are abstract things'' to the question "Are there abstract things?'' is logically inconsistent. But that's fine. No one ever said that every GMT is viable. Indeed part of the *point* of my

[2]It is not a trivial matter to say what a 'metaphysical thesis' or 'metaphysical issue' is (see, for example, Bennett [2016, §4] and van Inwagen and Sullivan [2017, §1]). I have in mind a fairly expansive interpretation: I hope that the examples I give at various points in the text suffice to make clear what I have in mind.

[3]By 'substantive' I mean 'non-disjunctive, non-gerrymandered'. I'm assuming that some claims are (in themselves) disjunctive or gerrymandered and others not, even though it is of course true that every claim is at least equivalent to some claim that can be expressed disjunctively. See, inter alia, Lewis [1983] (on properties) and Sider [2011]. In particular I'm assuming that some disjunctions of GMTs are (in themselves) disjunctive. Thus, not every disjunction of GMTs is a substantive metaphysical thesis. This is crucial for otherwise it would be impossible for any (logically consistent) GMTs to span the metaphysical ocean (a notion I go on to define), since they at least agree on their own disjunction.

argument, as we shall see, is that very few GMTs are.

As far as I can tell, no one has ever put forward a complete GMT. The issues are too many and our years too few. Some philosophers, however, have gone quite far towards developing GMTs. Call their theories *quasi-GMTs* (QGMTs). QGMTs are wide-ranging but not comprehensive metaphysical systems. For very many but not all substantive metaphysical questions, either it or its negation is one of the set's members. (How many is "very many''? That is an admittedly vague term. I hope that the examples of QGMTs I presently cite and claims I go on to make about QGMTs suffice to settle more-or-less what's meant.) Examples of QGMTs include: Neoplatonism, Epicureanism, Spinozism, Leibnizian Monadism, Hegelianism, Quinean Naturalism, and Lewisian Modal Realism cum Humeanism.

QGMTs are not themselves in the metaphysical ocean, since they are neither GMTs (points in the metaphysical ocean) nor sets of GMTs (regions in the metaphysical ocean). But they have proxies in the metaphysical ocean. For every QGMT, there is the largest region in the metaphysical ocean such that every one of its members has that QGMT as a subset. That region has as many dimensions as issues the QGMT leaves unaddressed.

To facilitate smoother discussion, all reference to particular QGMTs should henceforth be understood as reference to their proxies, and any use of 'QGMT' should henceforth be understood as 'QGMT-proxy'. (As far as I can tell nothing would be lost if in Lewisian fashion I simply identified QGMTs with what I have called their proxies. But I cater to the sticklers.) Thus, employing the convention I have just adopted, a QGMT is a region in the metaphysical ocean and its members are GMTs, not answers to metaphysical questions. Indeed, a GMT is *a completion of* a QGMT, let us say, if the former is a member of the latter.

Now back to GMTs proper. Two GMTs are *theoretically distant* if the theoretical virtues they possess are disparate enough that we can't know which one has the all-things-considered better collection of virtues. Two GMTs are *intuitively distant* if there is no frame of mind in which we feel the intuitive force of both GMTs. Think rabbit-duck illusion: there is no frame of mind in which it looks to us both like a rabbit and like a duck. Two GMTs are *distant*, simpliciter, if they are both theoretically distant and intuitively distant.

More generally, some GMTs (two or more) are distant if they are pairwise distant. We can extend the notion of distance in the natural way so that it applies not just to individual GMTs, but to regions of GMTs: two regions are distant if every member of the one is distant from every member of the other. More generally, some regions (two or more) are distant if they are pairwise distant. A region of GMTs *is made of distant regions* if there is some partition of the region such that all the subsets in the partition are distant. For example, the union of Aristotelianism and idealism is arguably made of distant regions since each completion of Aristotelianism is arguably distant from each completion of idealism.

Next, say that two GMTs *span the metaphysical ocean* if their intersection is

empty. That happens just in case there is no substantive metaphysical thesis that is common to both of them. More generally, some GMTs (two or more) span the metaphysical ocean if their intersection is empty. We can likewise say that a region of GMTs spans the metaphysical ocean when its members span the metaphysical ocean. We can extend the notion of spanning so that it applies not just to pluralities of individual GMTs and a single region of GMTs, but to pluralities of regions of GMTs. Two regions span the metaphysical ocean if any region that has a non-empty intersection with each of the two regions spans the metaphysical ocean. If you "take'' at least one GMT from each, the collection of GMTs you will have "taken'' has an empty intersection. More generally, some regions (two or more) span the metaphysical ocean if any region that has a non-empty intersection with each of them spans the metaphysical ocean. Again, if you "take'' at least one GMT from each, the collection of GMTs you will have "taken'' has an empty intersection.

A region's being made of distant regions is a matter of being sufficiently scattered. A region's spanning the metaphysical ocean is a matter of being sufficiently stretched. It's possible for a region to be be sufficiently scattered but not sufficiently stretched (not stretched to the far reaches of the metaphysical ocean), and it's possible for a region to be sufficiently stretched but not at all scattered (it's "all in one piece'').

Finally, a region of GMTs *is made of distant regions that span the metaphysical ocean* if there is some partition of the region such that the subsets in the partition both are distant and span the metaphysical ocean. Note: this is a more stringent condition than the simple conjunction of being made of distant regions and spanning the metaphysical ocean. It is a matter of the stretching and scattering being connected in the right sort of way. The more stringent condition entails the conjunction, but not vice versa.

I can now state my argument more carefully and explicitly, as follows:

1. The region of viable GMTs is made of distant regions that span the metaphysical ocean.

2. If (1), then the region of viable GMTs is made of regions that not only are distant and span the metaphysical ocean but also are such that for each of them, for all we are in a position to know the true GMT is a member of *it*—where by 'for all we are in a position to know, q' I just mean 'we are not in a position to know that it's not the case that q'.[4]

3. If the region of viable GMTs is made of distant regions that span the metaphysical ocean and are such that for each of them, for all we are in a position to know the true GMT is a member of it, then we do not know any substantive metaphysical thesis at all.

[4]Likewise, by 'for all we know, q' I just mean 'we do not know that it's not the case that q'.

It follows from these three premises that we do not know any substantive metaphysical thesis at all.

I turn next to a defense of the premises. But first a word on what is meant by 'viable': a GMT is viable just in case it is, as we might say, *dialectically stable*. (And a QGMT is viable if and only if some completion of it is viable, i.e dialectically stable.) A GMT is dialectically stable only if it is logically consistent. But logical consistency does not suffice. More stringently, a GMT is dialectically stable only if one could rationally endorse it (i.e. the conjunction of its members) in full awareness of all the dialectical connections between metaphysical issues. Some GMTs are such that there is a rationally compelling argument (even if not logically demonstrative) from some of its members to the negation of another of its members. Those are not viable.

3 First Premise: Scattered and Stretched

One might argue for the first premise as follows. (Warning! What I am about to lay out is not intended to convince the reader—although it is how *I* came to be convinced of the premise—and it is not the argument I rely on here. I put it forward at this point because it lays bare the *reason* the first premise is true, *if* it is; it should therefore help, I hope, in making the first premise both more concrete and more of a "live option".) Each metaphysical question is wrapped up with a host of others. Take the following sequence of questions: Does time pass? Is the future real? How do material objects persist? Under what conditions do some material objects compose another? What is the "ontology of substances" (constituent, relational...)? Are there universals? Are there abstract entities? What is possible, and what is it to be possible? What are laws? Are we free? The answer to each of these questions bears on the answer to its immediate successor, and vice versa. ('Bears on it' in the sense that there are non-trivial logical and dialectical relations between them.) So start with a viable GMT. Tinker with one part. It has a domino effect. The GMT is no longer viable. Rework the parts towards a viable GMT. But end up with a GMT that is radically different. Now tinker with the new viable GMT—until we end up with yet another viable GMT that is radically different. And so on. Now: Can we feel the intuitive force of more than one at once? And: for any pair can we know which has the all-things-considered better collection of virtues? And: Is there any substantive metaphysical thesis on which all of the resultant GMTs agree? I think not.

This skeletal argument is suggestive.[5] However, to put flesh on the bones of

[5]Indeed, in recent years a growing number of metaphysicians have similarly suggested that very many metaphysical questions are wrapped up with one another and that as a result viable metaphysical systems are few and far between. See, e.g., Nolan [2007], Armstrong [2010], Heil

the argument I would actually have to work through all the ways in which different metaphysical questions are wrapped up with each other. This would take at least a book-length treatment of the metaphysical issues themselves and is beyond the scope of this paper. So, as I already warned you, I won't rely on this skeletal argument and the rhetorical questions I asked. I instead turn to an indirect, inductive argument.

Induction suggests that the region of viable QGMTs (the union of viable QGMTs) is made of distant regions. For those QGMTs history has judged to be viable can be grouped into regions that are distant. That's not to say, of course, that every two viable QGMTs are distant: some, like Aristotle's Aristotelianism and Suarez's Aristotelianism, are two QGMTs that might well be viable and are almost certainly not distant. It's just to say there is *some* way to "break down'' the region of viable QGMTs into regions that are distant.[6]

Here's one way to begin to see that. Let's divide the QGMTs history has judged to be viable into two camps: the naturalist camp and the supernaturalist camp. The QGMTs in the first camp say that anything that explains how things are in the ordinary business of life is just another ordinary thing; that is, a thing no more different in kind from quinoa than quarks or quasars. Those QGMTs in the second camp disagree. They all say that there is something that is rather extraordinary, something much more different from quinoa than is a quark or a quasar, whose existence and nature explains some if not all of what goes on in the ordinary business of life. Neoplatonism, with its One, Spinozism, with its lone Substance, Leibnizian Monadism, with its Harmonizer of the monads, and Hegelianism, with its Absolute, all belong to the second camp. (Even if Spinoza's lone Substance is supposed to be Nature itself, the lone Substance, with its infinite attributes, is still *much* more different in kind from quinoa than quarks or quasars, and thus Spinozism belongs to the supernaturalist camp *as far as I have characterized it.*) Epicureanism, Quinean naturalism, and Lewisian Modal Realism cum Humeanism, lacking any-

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[2017], Williams [2017], and Koons and Pickavance [2017]. But I cannot say whether they would agree with the first premise exactly as I've formulated it.

[6]More exactly, I only need, and only believe, the weaker claim that there is some partition of the region of viable QGMTs such that all the subsets in the partition are as we might say, *viable-distant*—not distant, simpliciter. Two regions are *viable-distant* if every *viable* member of the one is distant from every *viable* member of the other, and some regions (two or more) are *viable-distant* if they are pairwise *viable-distant.* Relatedly, although I go on to claim that any naturalist GMT is intuitively distant and theoretically distant from any supernaturalist GMT, I only need, and only believe, the weaker claim that any *viable* naturalist GMT is intuitively distant and theoretically distant from any *viable* supernaturalist GMT. And relatedly and finally, although I on to claim that the region of viable QGMTs is made of distant regions that span the metaphysical ocean, I only need, and only believe , the weaker claim that the region of viable QGMTs is made of *viable*-distant regions that span the metaphysical ocean. But the subtle differences between the claims in the text and the weaker claims I need matter only in minor ways—they come into play in nt. 8 and nt. 9—and so I ignore the complication in the text.

thing like those extraordinary things, all belong to the first camp.

But, I claim, any naturalist GMT—any GMT that is a completion of a naturalist QGMT—is intuitively distant and theoretically distant from any supernaturalist GMT.

Two GMTs are intuitively distant, recall, if there is no frame of mind in which we feel the intuitive force of both. I'm using the term 'intuitive force' in a normative sense—the intuitive force of a theory is the degree of intuitive plausibility that the theory *should* have for us. One feels the intuitive force of a theory just in case it seems to one as intuitively plausible as it *should*. (Thus, it's perfectly coherent for one to find a theory intuitively plausible to *some degree* but to fail to feel its intuitive force. And it's also perfectly coherent for one not to feel the intuitive force of a theory but to fail to realize that one doesn't, or even to believe that one does.) Thus, the first half of my claim is that for any naturalist GMT and any supernaturalist GMT, there is no frame of mind in which each theory seems to us as intuitively plausible as it should.

This seems rather evidently so for at least some of us. For it doesn't seem very likely that one or the other of such venerable and historically resilient positions as naturalism and supernaturalism has *no* intuitive force. Presumably, each has *some non-negligible degree of intuitive force*. And yet there are naturalist philosophers who do not—who *cannot*—find supernaturalism *at all* intuitively plausible, and there are supernaturalist philosophers who do not—who *cannot*—find naturalism *at all* intuitively plausible.

Thomas Nagel nicely represents those naturalist philosophers:

> I confess to an ungrounded assumption of my own, in not finding it possible to regard the design alternative as a real option. [2012, p. 12]

And Peter van Inwagen nicely represents those supernaturalist philosophers::

> I know that it is now impossible for me to represent the world to myself as anything but dependent.[7] [1994, p. 35]

[7]It is worth quoting the passage in full, since it is relevant at many points (note well his reference to the rabbit-duck illusion):

> First, I can remember having a picture of the cosmos, the physical universe, as a self-subsistent thing, something that is just there and requires no explanation. When I say a "having a picture,'' I am trying to describe a state of mind that could be called up whenever I desired, and which centered round a certain mental image. This mental image–it somehow represented the whole world–was associated with a felt conviction that what the image represented was self-subsistent. I can still call the image to mind (I *think* it's the same image) and it still represents the whole world, but it is now associated with a felt conviction that what it represents is *not* self-subsistent, that it must depend on something else, something not represented by any feature of the image, and which must be, in some way that the experience leaves indeterminate, radically different in kind from what the image represents. Interestingly enough,

Nagel and van Inwagen, in not finding the "opposing view" at all intuitively plausible, are thus failing to feel that view's intuitive force. Likewise for all the other naturalists (supernaturalists) who fail to find supernaturalism (naturalism) at all intuitively plausible. Of course, there *are* naturalists who find supernaturalism *somewhat* intuitively plausible and supernaturalists who find naturalism *somewhat* intuitively plausible. But that is consistent with the following, which seems to be the best explanation of what's going on in cases like that of Nagel and van Inwagen: The frame of mind in which it's possible for us to feel the intuitive force of naturalism (supernaturalism) is one that *distorts* the degree of plausibility supernaturalism (naturalism) seems to have, in such a way that the latter doesn't seem as plausible as it should. The degree of distortion can vary—and Nagel and van Inwagen might suffer a greater degree of distortion than others—but the distortion is there regardless. This explanation seems to me far superior to any explanation that makes of Nagel and van Inwagen radically exceptional: It is more elegant and more unified and more respectful of their prodigious philosophical and imaginative capabilities than any other such available explanation.

Thus, we are all (or nearly enough as to make no difference) such that for any naturalist GMT and any supernaturalist GMT, there is no frame of mind in which we feel the intuitive force of both. (And don't say, "Well that's not true for *me*. *I* find each one intuitively plausible to some degree—even if I endorse one of them. Remember: it's perfectly coherent for one to find a theory intuitively plausible to *some degree* but to fail to feel its intuitive force. And it's also perfectly coherent for one not to feel the intuitive force of a theory but believe that one does.) Any naturalist GMT is therefore intuitively distant from any supernaturalist GMT.

Theoretical virtues bring the two no closer together. It is very hard to deny the naturalist camp its advantage in ontological parsimony–at least inasmuch as we are considering a parsimony in *kinds*. And it is very hard to deny the supernaturalist camp its advantage in explanatory unity.[8] And it is very hard to deny that because of these very different virtues one can't know which of the two camps has

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> there was a period of transition, a period during which I could move back and forth at will, in "duck-rabbit'' fashion, between experiencing the image as representing the world as self subsistent and experiencing the image as representing the world as dependent. I am not sure what period in my life, as measured by the guideposts of external biography, this transition period coincided with. I know that it is now impossible for me to represent the world to myself as anything but dependent.

[8]Remember that it is part of what it is to be a supernaturalist GMT that it posits something whose existence and nature explains some of what goes on in the ordinary business of life. If, given how the GMT is filled out, what it posits couldn't explain what goes on even if it *did* exist, then that GMT wouldn't be viable, and it is only the *viable* supernaturalist GMTs that need concern us. See nt. 6.

the all-things-considered better collection of virtues.[9]

So there is some way to break down the region of QGMTs history has judged viable into regions that are distant: simply break it down into the naturalist and supernaturalist regions. Induction thus suggests that the region of viable QGMTs is made of distant regions.

And while perhaps not as evident as the previous point, induction suggests that the region of viable QGMTs is made of distant regions *that span the metaphysical ocean*. Once attuned to the distance between the supernaturalist and naturalist regions, it is easy to notice more fine-grained partitions of the region of QGMTs history has judged to be viable into regions that are pairwise distant. (One partition X of a region is more fine-grained than another partition Y of that region iff every subset in X is a subset of some subset in Y, but not vice versa.) Leibnizian Monadism is distant from the other versions of supernaturalism (and a fortiori from naturalisms), for example. It's very hard to see how one could feel both the intuitive force of Leibniz's pluralistic metaphysics and the intuitive force of the others supernaturalists' monistic metaphysics. As to theoretical virtues: It is very hard to deny the Leibnizian view its advantage over other supernaturalisms in its agreement with our pre-theoretical beliefs. And it is very hard to deny the other supernaturalisms their advantage over Leibnizian monadism in ontological parsimony. And it is very hard to deny that because of these very different virtues one can't know which of Leibnizian monadism and the remainder of the supernaturalist camp has the all-things-considered better collection of virtues. We can continue partitioning in this way until we reach the *most* fine-grained partition into distant regions of the region of QGMTs that history has judged to be viable.[10]

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[9]Of course, there are other theoretical virtues. But given the stark tradeoff between ontological parsimony and explanatory unity, it would seem that a naturalist (supernaturalist) GMT will emerge as a clear loser on the matter of theoretical virtues when facing off against a supernaturalist (naturalist) GMT only if the former does uniformly poorly in respect of all other virtues. But then it would hardly be a viable GMT. And again, it is only comparisons of the *viable* GMTs that need concern us. See nt. 6.

[10]Note: For any two partitions of a region into distant regions, either one is more fine-grained than the other, or there is some other partition of the region into distant regions that is more fine-grained than both. (This follows from how 'distant' has been defined.) So there can't be two partitions of a region into distant regions, each of which is such that no partition of the region into distant regions is more fine grained than it. Might it be the case, however, that *no* partition of a region into distant regions is such that no partition of the region into distant regions is more fine grained than it? That is, might it be the case that every partition of a region into distant regions is such that there is some partition of that region into distant regions that is more fine-grained than it? I suppose it could be. But that complication doesn't much matter for my argument, since we can "stop" partitioning once we get to a partition that spans the metaphysical ocean. So I'll harmlessly assume there is *exactly one* partition into distant regions of the region of QGMTs history has judged viable such that no other such partition is more fine-grained than it; from which, together with what I have already noted, it follows that there is some *most* fine-grained partition into distant regions of the region of QGMTs that history has judged to be viable, i.e. some partition (of that

It's very doubtful that there's any way to "take'' at least one GMT from each of the resultant scattered regions such that they'll all agree on some substantive metaphysical thesis. So induction suggests that the region of viable QGMTs is made of distant regions that span the metaphysical ocean.

And there is a straightforward relationship between this inductively supported claim about QGMTs and the corresponding claim about GMTs. I assume that (a) every GMT is the completion of some QGMT and (b) no QGMT is a union of two distant regions. And I have already stipulated that (c) a QGMT is viable if and only if some completion of it is viable. From these assumptions it follows that if the region of viable QGMTs is made of distant regions that span the metaphysical ocean, then the region of viable GMTs is also made of distant regions that span the metaphysical ocean.[11] Since induction supports the claim about the region of viable QGMTs, it also supports the claim about the region of viable GMTs.

Let us move on to a defense of the second premise.

4 Second Premise: No Knowledge of Grand Metaphysical Theories

Assume that the region of viable GMTs is indeed made of distant regions that span the metaphysical ocean. Call the regions that are distant, span the metaphysical ocean, and make up the region of viable GMTs, 'The ScatterStretchers'. (If there is more than one such plurality, arbitrarily choose one, and call that plurality 'The ScatterStretchers'.) Consider an arbitrary one of The ScatterStretchers: call it 'ScatterStretcher$_1$'. I offer a four-step argument for the conclusion that for all we are in a position to know, the true GMT is a member of ScatterStretcher$_1$. Since my choice of ScatterStretcher$_1$ was arbitrary, this will show the same regarding all The ScatterStretchers.

First step: one cannot come to know that a certain GMT is false on the grounds that it seems less plausible than certain other GMTs, if each of those other GMTs is intuitively distant from it. Consider it and any one of the others. Since the two are

region) into distant regions that is more fine-grained than every other partition (of that region) into distant regions.

[11] From (a) and (c) it follows that the region of viable GMTs is a subregion of the region of viable QGMTs; from (b) it follows that for each subset in any partition of the region of viable QGMTs into distant regions, there is some viable QGMT that is a subset of it (since no viable QGMT can stretch across more than one of those subsets); and from (c) it follows that for each viable QGMT there is a viable GMT that is a member of it. Thus, simply partition the region of viable GMTs in a way that corresponds to the partition of the region of viable QGMTs: to each subset in the latter there corresponds the (non-empty) set of all viable GMTs that are members of that subset. The resulting partition is guaranteed to consist in subsets that are pairwise distant and span the metaphysical ocean. (Importantly, this is guaranteed so long as the region of viable QGMTs is made of *viable*-distant regions that span the metaphysical ocean. See nt. 6.)

intuitively distant, no matter what frame of mind one is in one will fail to find at least one of them as intuitive plausible as one should. That is, one's intuitions are skewed. But then one cannot come to know that the one is false on the grounds that it seems less plausible than the other. For even if one is right in a given case that it *is* false, one's being right about that would be a matter of luck—one was lucky enough to be in the frame of mind in which *the intuitive appearances were skewed in the right direction*—and being right by luck in that way is incompatible with knowledge.[12]

Compare: Sally looks out and from a great distance sees an object that at first glance appears to her to be a duck. She continues to gaze at it and it still appears to her to be a duck. So she judges that it is not a rabbit. (Maybe she's trying to ascertain if there are any rabbits in the neighborhood.) Suppose as a matter of fact she's right, and it's not a rabbit (indeed, it's a duck). Does Sally *know* it's not a rabbit, on the grounds that it appears to her (even after gazing at it for some time) a lot less like a rabbit than like a duck? That will depend on some details about Sally. But suppose that when Sally looks out from a great distance at either a duck or a rabbit, whether it looks to her at first glance like a duck or like a rabbit doesn't depend on whether it is in fact a duck or a rabbit—maybe it depends on her mood, or on what she was just thinking about before, or on nothing at all. And suppose further that once an object at such a distance looks to Sally at

[12]It is a platitude in epistemology that knowledge precludes *some* sort of luck. Saying exactly what sort (or sorts) of luck it precludes is non-trivial (Pritchard [2005, pp. 1–13]). It is fairly standard to cash out the relevant notion of luck in modal terms, in the form of either a sensitivity principle or a safety principle. (For a classic defense of sensitivity as a necessary condition for knowledge, see Nozick [1981]; for a classic defense of safety as a necessary condition for knowledge, see Williamson [2000]; for a classic statement of a preference for safety over sensitivity as a way of cashing out a sort of luck precluded by knowledge, see Pritchard [2005, §6.7]; for a discussion of an alternative, virtue-theoretic way of cashing out the notion, see Pritchard [2005, §7].)

It is true that cashing it out in either of those modal ways runs into problems with necessary truths, since both sensitivity and safety seem to be trivially satisfied for such truths (Roland and Cogburn [2011]). And this might prove difficult for a non-trivial application in *our* case, since GMTs might be necessary: necessarily true if true and necessarily false if false. But a solution is readily available, at least for the more popular safety principle: what is required is that in most (or nearly all) of the nearby possible worlds in which the subject forms a belief in the same way that she does in the actual world her belief is true, *whether or not she forms the same belief as in the actual world or even forms a belief about the same issue* (see Williamson [2000, p. 182] and Pritchard [2009, p. 34]). Applied to the case of two intuitively distant GMTs, our lucky subject errs about the very same issue—and certainly about other issues where she is entertaining two intuitively distant claims—in many of the nearby possible worlds in which she forms a belief in the same way that she does in the actual world, namely the way of comparative plausibility. And thus her belief that a certain GMT is false is not safe.

In any case, however one cashes out the relevant notion of luck, it seems clear enough from its close analogy to the case of Sally that our case should count as lucky in a knowledge-precluding way. (Although, in light of the classic Gendler and Hawthorne [2005] I hesitate to make any definitive pronouncements here.)

first glance to be a duck (rabbit), that prevents her from *seeing anything rabbit*-y (duck-y) about it; she just *can't* see the ways in which *it in fact does look* from that distance very much like a rabbit. Then it seems clear that Sally does *not* know that it's not a rabbit. For even though Sally is right that it is not a rabbit, her being right about that is a matter of luck—Sally was lucky enough that *the perceptual appearances were skewed in the right direction*—and being right by luck in that way is incompatible with knowledge. So the same goes for the pair of intuitively distant GMTs. By the same token, one cannot come to know that a certain GMT is false on the grounds that it seem less plausible than one *or more* other GMTs, if each of those other GMTs is intuitively distant from it. Luck is not obviated by adding more competing GMTs.

Second step: one cannot come to know that a certain GMT is false on the grounds that certain other GMTs have an all-things-considered better collection of virtues than it does, if each of those other GMTs is theoretically distant from it. Here the reason is straightforward: since each of the other GMTs is theoretically distant from it, one cannot in fact know that any of them has an all-things-considered better collection of virtues than it does.

Third step: if the first and second steps are right, then it's not possible for us to rely on dialectical stability or theoretical virtues or intuitive plausibility or any combination thereof to come to know of $\text{ScatterStretcher}_1$ that *none* of the GMTs $\text{ScatterStretcher}_1$ has as a member is true. For it has at least one viable GMT as a member, and each of the viable GMTs is dialectically stable, so dialectical stability is of no use in coming to know that. And every other one of The ScatterStretchers is distant from $\text{ScatterStretcher}_1$, so neither intuitive plausibility nor theoretical virtue is of any use in coming to know that—the former as I argued in the first step and the latter as I argued in the second step. Finally, combining dialectical stability and theoretical virtues and intuitive plausibility together would seem to get us no further. For all we are in a position to know (on those grounds), the true GMT is a member of $\text{ScatterStretcher}_1$.

Fourth step: if the combination of dialectical stability and theoretical virtues and intuitive plausibility fails to afford us knowledge that the true GMT is not to be found in $\text{ScatterStretcher}_1$, then nothing affords us that knowledge.

One might suggest that I am illegitimately ignoring so-called intrinsic probability: the prior probability of a GMT before any sensory evidence is accumulated. But we have no other basis to assess and compare the intrinsic probabilities of different ScatterStretchers except dialectical stability, theoretical virtue, and intuitive plausibility.

One might suggest that I am illegitimately ignoring our sensory evidence. But no GMT that is *inconsistent* with such evidence is viable. (It's not clear that a GMT could be inconsistent with such evidence in the first place—that depends in part on what our sensory evidence consists in—but at any rate, if it is so inconsistent, it won't be viable.) So every viable GMT is at least *consistent* with our sensory

evidence. And mounting a *probabilistic* argument on the basis of sensory evidence to come to know that the true GMT is not to be found in ScatterStretcher$_1$ would require knowledge of the intrinsic probabilities—since a proposition's posterior probability is partly a function of its prior probability—which we have just noted is not available. Likewise, mounting an *abductive* argument on the basis of sensory evidence to come to know that the true GMT is not to be found in ScatterStretcher$_1$ would require knowledge of the relative strengths of their theoretical virtues and intuitive plausibility, which we have argued is not available.

One might suggest, finally, that I am illegitimately ignoring a sensus metaphysicatis, an ability to just *see* where the true GMT lies or doesn't lie. However, I doubt that anyone possesses such an ability with regard to recondite metaphysical matters.

So we have no *other* way to know that the true GMT is not a member of ScatterStretcher$_1$: for all we are in a position to know, period, the true GMT lies therein. Since my choice of ScatterStretcher$_1$ was arbitrary, the same can be said regarding all The ScatterStretchers.

Let us move on to a defense of the third and final premise.

5 Third Premise: No Knowledge of Metaphysics

Assume that the region of viable GMTs is indeed made of distant regions that span the metaphysical ocean and are such that for each of them, for all we are in a position to know the true GMT is a member of it. Again, call those regions, 'The ScatterStretchers'. Since The ScatterStretchers span the metaphysical ocean—and since GMTs are silent on no substantive metaphysical thesis—for every substantive metaphysical thesis there is some region of The ScatterStretchers such that every GMT that is a member of that region denies that thesis. But then we know no substantive metaphysical thesis at all. If we knew some such thesis, then we'd be in a position to know, for some particular one of the ScatterStretchers, that the true GMT is not a member of it.[13] And we are not in a position to know that.

6 Objections and Replies

I now turn to a number of objections:

[13]Here I appeal to a relatively uncontroversial version of knowledge closure: if S knows p and p obviously entails q, then S is in a position to know q. (There might be need for a caveat, something like "so long as S can infer q from p together with p's entailing q while maintaining knowledge of both p and p's entailing q''. Whether or not this is so will not affect our reliance here on the principle.)

Objection 1: Yawn. Your conclusion is not very interesting. Most metaphysicians already have modest epistemic pretensions. They claim at most that they are justified (or rational, or reasonable,...) in believing certain substantive metaphysical theses, not that they know such theses. Thus, Theodore Sider:

> Metaphysical inquiry can survive if we are willing to live with highly tentative conclusions. Let's not kid ourselves: metaphysics *is* highly speculative! It does not follow that it is entirely without rational grounds. I will proceed assuming that reasonable belief in metaphysics is indeed possible... [2001]

Replies: I offer two replies. First, I'm not quite sure about the modest epistemic pretensions of *most* metaphysicians. While perhaps few metaphysicians explicitly claim knowledge of substantive metaphysical theses, many confidently and unqualifiedly assert such theses.[14] And it seems improper to confidently and unqualifiedly assert what you don't know; or, at the very least it seems improper to confidently and unqualifiedly assert what you don't *believe* that you know; or, at the very least it seems improper to confidently and unqualifiedly assert what you believe that you *don't* know.[15] So, if my argument is right then many metaphysicians act in a way that they ought not to act; or, at the very least if my argument succeeds in convincing them then they ought to stop acting how they do.

Second, my argument can plausibly be extended to show that we cannot even *justifiably* (*rationally*, *reasonably*,...) believe any substantive metaphysical thesis.[16] Begin with the second premise: my argument for that premise relied on the platitude that knowledge is incompatible with luck. It's true that the same does not go for justified (rational, reasonable,...) belief, which, unlike knowledge, is compatible with luck. Indeed, Gettier cases trade on that very point. But there is an analogue that will work. Someone *who came to see* the truth of my argument's first premise—and thereby came to see that any true belief about which GMT is correct would be lucky—would then no longer have a justified belief about which GMT is correct (the same way that a subject in a Gettier case *who came to realize*

[14]These are the folks to whom Jason Turner [2016, p. 1] refers when he says that he finds himself "a bit amazed (and a touch envious) when other philosophers confidently announce that thus-and-so argument or consideration shows some favoured theory to be the Whole Unvarnished Truth."

[15]The first claim follows from the so-called Knowledge Norm of Assertion (see, inter alia, Williamson [2000, Ch. 11]), according to which one must: assert p only if one knows p. But, plausibly, even those who reject the Knowledge Norm should accept that one must: assert p only if one believes that one knows p (see Hirsch [2017, p. 49-51]; cf. Williamson [2000, p. 262]). And plausibly, even those who reject that second norm should accept that one must: assert p only if one doesn't believe that one doesn't know p. (This last norm would equally well explain the infelicity of such statements as "I don't know whether p, but p".) Nonetheless, not everyone would accept even the third norm. See, e.g., Lackey [2007].

[16]Thanks to Dan Baras for helping me see this.

she was in a Gettier case would no longer be justified either). So we can modify the first and second premises as follows[17]:

1'. We see that the region of viable GMTs is made of distant regions that span the metaphysical ocean

2'. If (1'), then the region of viable GMTs is made of regions that not only are distant and span the metaphysical ocean but also are such that for each of them, for all we are in a position to justifiably (rationally, reasonably,...) believe, the true GMT is a member of it.

The third premise can be modified in the natural way as well:

3'. If the region of viable GMTs is made of distant regions that span the metaphysical ocean and are such that for each of them, for all we are in a position to justifiably (rationally, reasonably,...) believe the true GMT is a member of it, then we do not justifiably (rationally, reasonably,...) believe any substantive metaphysical thesis at all.

It should be acknowledged that in my defense of the third premise I relied on the closure of knowledge (or being in a position to know) under obvious entailment. And one might accept that principle but deny the closure of justification (or being in a position to be justified) under obvious entailment. (Using more standard terminology, the principle would be this: if p is propositionally justified for S, and p obviously entails q, then q is propositionally justified for S.) Thus, one might say about Fred Dretske's well-known zebra example: one can neither know nor justifiably believe that the animal in front of you is not a cleverly disguised mule. But while it follows (given closure of knowledge) that one cannot know that it is a zebra, it is still true that one can justifiably believe that it is a zebra. But it would be an odd combination of theories of justification and knowledge that would have that result (roughly, a certain kind of externalism about justification combined with either internalism or another kind of externalism about knowledge). More to the point, even if one could distinguish in that way, the closure of justification is still plausible (see Klein [1981], Luper [2016, §6].) And that suffices for what I claim, viz. that my argument can *plausibly* be extended to show that we cannot even justifiably (or rationally, or reasonably,...) believe any substantive metaphysical thesis.

Objection 2: Now you're in deep trouble. If indeed your argument can be extended in the way you suggest, then your argument is self-defeating. For you can

[17]In addition, we will need to modify the definition of 'theoretically distant' (and hence 'distant') to 'the theoretical virtues they possess are disparate enough that we can't justifiably believe of either that it has the all-things-considered better collection of virtues'.

justifiably believe (1') only if you can justifiably believe some substantive metaphysical theses. In particular, you need to be able to justifiably believe about some GMTs/QGMTs that they are viable and about some others that they are not viable. But that is to justifiably believe some substantive metaphysical theses. So your extended argument, which succeeds if your original argument does, is self-defeating and hence does not succeed.

Reply: It is not true that the claim that a certain GMT is viable is a substantive metaphysical thesis. It is a claim about the dialectical relations between substantive metaphysical theses. I have no quarrel with jusitifed belief about, or even knowledge of, those dialectical relations. Indeed, I assume that many of us have such knowledge, and is perhaps the best that we metaphysicians can hope for.[18]

Objection 3: I will grant that. But you're still in deep trouble. For your arguments—whether about knowledge or justified belief—can be generalized to all philosophical theses. *Grand Philosophical Theories* are comprehensive philosophical systems. Each is a set of theses that settles every philosophical issue. Adjust the other definitions and premises accordingly. The resulting arguments are just as compelling as yours. Thus, your original argument can be generalized to show that we do not know any substantive philosophical thesis at all; and, more problematically, the extended version can be generalized to show that we do not justifiably (rationally, reasonably,...) believe any substantive philosophical thesis at all. But of course the premises and conclusion are substantive *philosophical* theses, even if they are not substantive *metaphysical* theses. So your extended argument, which succeeds if your original argument does, is self-defeating and hence does not succeed.

Reply: The arguments do not generalize, or at least not obviously so. A generalized version of the first premise is much less plausible than the original. First-order ethical questions, say, do not seem to be wrapped up with metaphysical questions in the same way that metaphysical questions are wrapped up with each other. So a given GMT can be extended in any number of viable ethical directions, none of which is distant from any of the rest. (Note the following "geometrical" point: It can happen that a region in an n-dimensional space is not made of distant regions while an m-dimensional cross-section ($m < n$) of that region is made of distant regions.)

Objection 4: I have objected that your argument, if successful, generates a skepticism even more global than global metaphysical skepticism. Now I offer the

[18] As Robert Koons pointed out to me, we can, consistently with my argument, relatedly hope for knowledge of a disjunction of a small handful of GMTs (or QGMTs). This won't constitute knowledge of a substantive metaphysical thesis, as I've defined it in nt. 3. But it may well be worth having nonetheless.

opposite objection: Your argument, even if successful, generates a skepticism that isn't quite as global as global metaphysical skepticism. For there are substantive metaphysical theses that are obviously implied by things we do know. For example, I know that I exist (and you know that you exist, so try this out for yourself). And the fact that I exist obviously implies that there are objects, and more specifically even, that there are persons. So I can go on to infer, and thereby come to know, that there are objects and persons. And even if the claim that I exist is not a substantive metaphysical thesis—and I don't see why it wouldn't be—the claims that there are objects and persons better be. (If such claims are not substantive metaphysical theses, then I can't really tell what your skepticism comes to.) So I know certain substantive metaphysical theses, and so there is something wrong with, or at least some limitation on, your argument.

Reply: *Distinguo*. There are at least two senses of "I exist". One is *metaphysically neutral*: It is consistent with there being nothing but "little patches of colours or sounds" (Russell [1985]), and consistent with there being nothing but a single heterogeneous Blobject (Horgan and Potrc [2009]), and consistent even with Ontological Nihilism, according to which there is nothing at all (Hawthorne and Cortens [1995] and Turner [2010]). What *is* the sense then it which it says I exist? Well, in whatever sense the Logical Atomist or the Blobjectivist or the Ontological Nihilist will say that there are mountains, but no fairies. (These philosophers aren't *mad*.) And then there is a sense that is *metaphysically robust*: It is inconsistent with Ontological Nihilism, and with there being nothing but a single Blobject, and with there being nothing but little patches of colours or sounds (see Olson [2007, §8.1-§8.2]).

I grant that I know that I exist, in the metaphysically neutral sense of "I exist". But that of course fails to imply, let alone obviously imply, that there are objects and persons. And I deny that I know that I exist, in the metaphysically robust sense of "I exist". On what grounds do I deny that? On the grounds of my argument, of course. I can even point to some viable QGMTs, each such that (a) if my argument's first and second premises are true, I can't know that the true GMT is not a member of it, and (b) if the true GMT is a member of it, then I don't exist (in the metaphysically robust sense of "I exist"): Logical Atomism and Blobjectivism and Ontological Nihilism, for starters. If you don't think these are viable, I ask you to humbly read the extant powerful presentations of them. If you think that though they are viable I can know they are false, I ask you to specify where my arguments for the first two premises have gone wrong. Until such time, I am prepared to acknowledge that I do not know—and perhaps do not even justifiably believe—that I exist, in the metaphysically robust sense of "I exist".[19]

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