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Conditions of Fundamental Metaphysics: A critique of Jorge Gracia's proposal

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Introduction

Jorge Gracia's paper "The Fundamental Character of Metaphysics" (2014) proposes five conditions that, if satisfied, would be sufficient to establish metaphysics as a fundamental discipline for other sciences: (1) universal extension, (2) ontological neutralism, (3) *sui generis* character, (4) overall disciplinary integration, and (5) necessity. After framing the relevance and motivation for such a project, I make the case that his metaphysical project requires revision. Not only are the conditions insufficient for fundamental character, there are problems with the conditions themselves. His project intends to be radically inclusive, yet unintentionally excludes certain views; and his notion of fundamentality avoids reference to establishing normative *principia*, yet a key benefit of grounding is to provide such. Finally, an examination of the individual conditions yields that his first condition is ambiguous, unclear, and problematic; his second condition for neutrality is unworkable. Therefore, I do not preclude any and all metaphysics from becoming fundamental; rather, I argue that to establish fundamentality it would not be characterized as Gracia proposes.

An Order of the Sciences

Gracia's proposal is meta-metaphysical. It is an attempt to ground the diverse sciences with their diverse objects of study¹ upon a new scheme of metaphysics. A fundamental science, if possible, could ask and answer the following questions *about* the other disciplines: how should we different disciplines relate to one another? Should we give priority to one discipline and its findings over another? Might one science become fundamental to *all* the

¹ That is, the object that the inquirer attends to; commonly called a 'subject matter.'

other sciences? The goal of this proposal is to attain unity and order across disciplines. Gracia argues that this unity could be attained by addressing questions of fundamentality.

His current proposal for a fundamental metaphysics is a new resolution to an old concern. Among other historic attempts, Robert Kilwardby, a contemporary of Aquinas and archbishop of Canterbury, set out an order of the sciences (*de ortu scientiarum*),² wherein the so-called 'first principles' of philosophy would provide *principia* for natural philosophy and other sciences. On the one hand, if an order of the sciences is present today, mathematics or physics would be the most likely candidates with respect to providing ontological foundation for other sciences. On the other hand, as a basis for epistemic authority, an order of sciences may seem irrelevant, since academic disciplines often remain relatively autonomous and none is construed to have epistemic authority over another. The desire for unification has often been sought through interdisciplinary studies. Gracia is correct that the result has been inadequate.³ Interdisciplinary attempts are neither sufficiently exhaustive (they cannot go deep enough), nor are their methodologies capable of arbitrating between sciences consistently.⁴ A fundamental science would have robust methodology to unify the academic disciplines.

However, given the relative lack of confidence in earlier metaphysics proposals, a new approach may be necessary. Gracia claims that a fundamental science would need to take into

² José Filipe Silva. "Robert Kilwardby." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2014, 2014. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/robert-kilwardby/>

³ "The perspective adopted by each science is by itself too narrow for the understanding of the issues it investigate [sic] and their relation to other sciences." Jorge J. E. Gracia. "The Fundamental Character of Metaphysics." 310.

⁴ The researcher must shift subject matter and methodology at various points unique to their sciences; without self-consciously adopting a more fundamental methodology, she cannot mediate among the disciplines. One must stand outside of the discipline in order to make such determinations.

account that history of metaphysics' successes and failures, recognizing dead-ends of previous attempts and yet overcoming their respective limitations. Gracia has marked out what a fundamental metaphysical discipline would be characterized by: a science that studies everything and integrates everything together. He outlines five criteria that together would be sufficient for such a discipline to be fundamental.

Function of Criteria for Fundamentality

Gracia offers five conditions for fundamentality. In evaluating whether these conditions satisfy or are desirable unto a fundamental metaphysics, two matters must be discussed along the way: what *kinds* of conditions are these? If they are satisfied, would Gracia's proposal show metaphysics to have a fundamental character? Regarding the latter question, this will be discussed after outlining the conditions below.

Regarding the former question, it is not clear whether these criteria are to be taken as sufficient, necessary, or sufficient *and* necessary conditions. On the one hand, these criteria appear to function as necessary conditions, as his paper aims to determine "the conditions *required by* fundamentality."⁵ Similarly: "The fundamental character of metaphysics must then have to do with certain conditions that *must be satisfied* by the claims the discipline makes and the objects about which it makes those claims."⁶ That is, for metaphysics to be fundamental, they necessitate these conditions. On the other hand, the conditions seem to be regarded as sufficient conditions, as he claims that the "satisfaction of these conditions would be *sufficient*

⁵ Gracia, 305. Emphasis mine.

⁶ Gracia, 307. Emphasis mine.

to justify the thesis that metaphysics has a fundamental character, or is fundamental.”⁷ This is ambiguous.

On the assumption that Gracia is consistent, the reader ought to put these claims together and simply posit that the conditions are *both* sufficient and necessary.⁸ On the one hand, if he intended to merely provide sufficient conditions, then if it turns out a single criterion were to be jettisoned or replaced, that would do little damage to his thesis. On the other hand, if the criteria are sufficient only when held together, then the proposal suffers if but one condition is undermined. In what follows, I will make a case that two conditions can be undermined.

Gracia's Five Conditions

If metaphysics could be a fundamental discipline, what character would it have? According to Gracia, if the conditions below are satisfied, then metaphysics would possess fundamental character. I quote:

- (1c) universal extension: the object of study of metaphysics must extend to everything that can be an object of human understanding;
- (2c) ontological neutralism: the object of study of metaphysics must be conceived in ontologically neutral terms at the outset;
- (3c) *sui generis* character: the claims made in metaphysics about its object must not be the same as, or overlap with, the claims made in other disciplines of learning;
- (4c) overall disciplinary integration: the claims made in metaphysics about its object must include claims that serve to understand how the claims made by other disciplines of learning are related to, and can be integrated into, an overall consistent understanding of the world; and
- (5c) necessity: necessity is a desideratum of metaphysical claims.⁹

⁷ Gracia, 308. Emphasis mine.

⁸ That is, metaphysics has a fundamental character *if and only if* all five conditions are satisfied.

⁹ Gracia, 307.

While I will provide a fuller exposition below for the first two conditions, for now I will briefly outline their significance: The point of the first is that for any given discipline or inquiry, if metaphysics would be fundamental to it, then metaphysics must speak that discipline's object of study in some way, whether directly or indirectly. Second, ontological commitments are to be decided later, and nothing can be excluded from the outset. Third, a fundamental metaphysics must ask and answer distinct questions that other disciplines do not. Fourth, metaphysics must mediate between disciplines, relating their import to one another. Fifth, metaphysics attempts to ascertain necessary truths. A metaphysics possessing all five aspects, according to Gracia, would make it fundamental.

Fundamentality Sufficiently Satisfied?

The conditions, as presented, do not succeed in establishing a metaphysics with fundamental character. There are at least two concerns if it were to be admitted as a fundamental science. Moreover, as will be explained below, there seems to be problems with the conditions themselves. The first concern: Gracia is insufficiently inclusive even on his own terms. As Gracia proposes a metaphysics that satisfies his first condition, he suggests that it would investigate metaphysical matters in the following way:

“The understanding of metaphysics as the study of categories satisfies the condition of universal extension stipulated earlier for the fundamental character of the discipline in that it implies that metaphysics studies everything insofar as everything we know or can know must be able to be expressed by a predicate.”

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¹⁰ Gracia, 312.

His proposal does not seem careful here, because there are several metaphysical theories (e.g., Ted Sider's realism about structure) which explicitly seek to "go beyond the predicate."¹¹ It seems as though Gracia is being unnecessarily reductionistic according to his own project's criteria. Either Gracia must revise his metaphysical proposal in order to be inclusive (or at least sensitive) to these kinds of projects, or else he must reject them out of hand. If the former, it is not straight-forward how he would do so neutrally. If the latter, he would defeat one of his own conditions: either Universal Extension or Ontological Neutralism. Either way, revision is necessary.¹²

My second concern: Gracia does not appear to afford us the traditional benefits of a fundamental science. Fundamentality allows for mediation, perhaps, but how might metaphysics mediate without establishing the "first principles"? Yet Gracia finds limited value in that approach.¹³ Mediation implies norms by which to govern the relationships between disciplines. I have in mind that a fundamental metaphysics, if it grounds anything, would provide some sort of *principia* (first principles, first philosophy), whether in the form of "logical principles" or "ultimate causes" (not just efficient causes, but rather explanations or *because*s). Even the role of mediation assumes the possession of those *principia*, since it is by them it arbitrates. If *principia* are not desiderata of a fundamental metaphysics, I am unaware what the motivation for this project might be. While the fifth condition (necessity) may be included in

¹¹ Theodore Sider. *Writing the Book of the World*. 85-104.

¹² I tentatively recommend a revision that would accommodate these views as follows: metaphysics studies everything insofar as *everything we can refer to must be able to be predicated, quantified over, or gestured at by way of analogy*. This may be sufficiently inclusive for Gracia's aims.

¹³ Gracia, 305.

order to preserve this very trait, Gracia does not make this connection explicit.¹⁴ Thus, his proposal seems to be too modest to motivate pursuit.

Evaluation of the Conditions

Were the above concerns insufficient to reject Gracia's proposal as stated, some, though not all, of the conditions he proposes are unclear, suspect, or unnecessary. I will expost the first two individually, commenting only briefly on the latter three.

1. Universal Extension.

Gracia proposes a radically inclusive metaphysics, such that “metaphysics should have something to say about everything.”¹⁵ His first criterion has in view not just actual things, but also unreal things and concepts such as “being, non-being, reality, unreality,” etc.¹⁶ If humans can attend their minds to something, whether concrete objects (e.g., trees) or abstract objects (e.g., circles), metaphysics would speak to that intelligible object. However, there seems to be two different senses of the proper object of metaphysical study.

In the first sense, the proper object of study is everything, but the *method or manner* by means of which everything may be examined is unique. On this reading (which takes a cue from the third criterion), the *way* tables and trees are examined is the same *way* that unicorns and numbers are examined. Consider by analogy that if a physicist and a chemist study a table, they would have the same object but different methodologies regarding it. Metaphysics would have the widest scope possible, and thus no object would be outside of its study. This reading has

¹⁴ Gracia writes that the fifth condition is satisfied when a “metaphysics seeks to make claims involving necessarily connections.” Gracia, 314. The phrase ‘necessary connections’ is a far cry from an explicit goal of establishing principles or constraints for the other sciences.

¹⁵ Gracia, 307.

¹⁶ Gracia, 307.

support as Gracia claims, "a most fundamental discipline should study not just a number of the things that can be studied, but everything that can be studied."¹⁷

In the second sense, the object of study is *everything, albeit indirectly*. The object of study would be macro-categories, abstractions, and any concept (possible or impossible). On this reading, metaphysics would properly study the categories, but other things (indeed, all things) are brought in view only by implication or indirectly. Thus, for example, a table is not a proper object of metaphysical study; however, since metaphysics studies categories and predicates, any predicates that apply to tables would bring tables into metaphysics' periphery. Metaphysics then speaks to everything *indirectly* as it performs its unique metaphysical task. This reading has support as Gracia suggests that metaphysics would ask questions regarding the most general things,¹⁸ and that "metaphysics studies categories"¹⁹ and that it would exclude singular concrete objects, "such as 'Socrates'."²⁰

It is not obvious that one sense is to be preferred over the other. One way to determine could be whether one sense may be more successful (as a sufficient condition) at providing fundamentality. To that end, the first sense is very similar to the third criterion, such that it may imply and obviate a separate condition. The third criterion deals with the claims of metaphysics, as it would need to have a unique manner or method of study for its discipline such that its claims are not dealt with by another discipline. If the first criterion is so construed,

¹⁷ Gracia, 307.

¹⁸ Gracia, 307.

¹⁹ Gracia, 311.

²⁰ Gracia, 312.

the third is unnecessary. However, if the second sense is preferred, it is not obvious how Gracia's project differs from the first principles approaches he notes to have limited success.²¹

The last feature of this condition is that the inclusiveness should extend to metaphysical approaches themselves, taking into account the successes and failures of historical metaphysical inquiries. He argues that in order for metaphysics to be fundamental it does not need to (and must not) decide at the outset among different "reductionist"²² accounts of metaphysics. Rather metaphysics would draw from all prior investigations in which someone found an object worthy of study, whether an Aristotelian *being qua being*, or even those that investigate Nothing or Non-being.

The acceptance of this condition has a cost. Tentatively assume as a benefit that this condition justifies fundamentality. Not all metaphysical inquiries are equal; they have, as admitted, "successes and failures."²³ How could this fundamental discipline be implemented? On the one hand it must be inclusive of such categories of non-being, and yet on the other hand it must make determinations on the success of such approaches (so as to exclude failures). It is unclear how the discipline would be able to regard the investigation of non-being, on the whole, a failure: perhaps it can never make such a determination.²⁴ To me this is an undesirable consequence, because it calls into question how progress in metaphysical investigation might be possible.

²¹ Namely, metaphysics as fundamental via "logical principles" or via "ultimate causes." Gracia seems to me to be invoking here some kind of study of categories for the purpose of providing some principia for the other disciplines. Does he escape his own concerns?

²² Gracia, 309.

²³ Gracia, 308.

²⁴ Does Gracia have in mind a descriptive enterprise, whereby metaphysicians merely investigate categories and provide a wide taxonomy? I do not find this a likely reading. Questions regarding what metaphysics "must" seem to invoke unexplained norms.

2. *Ontological Neutralism.*

Given the condition of radical inclusivism, the condition appears to stipulate that when including all ontological categories and methods, they must be framed neutrally so as to not bias our development of metaphysics. This seems *prima facie* desirable, since a premature judgment of a “particular conception of the discipline” would indeed eliminate meta-metaphysical views by implication.

Yet how is neutrality as Gracia intends even possible? Not only does every metaphysician evaluate from a vantage (even when one has an open mind), it is not obvious how the metaphysician can remain neutral indefinitely. Perhaps a descriptive enterprise may have some traction, but as soon as any normative approach is involved, the metaphysician will be invoking criteria that may not be shared by other approaches. Is there a universal norm or principle to guide any and all meta-metaphysical views? I have doubts. Hence I call to question whether it is “an unnecessary reductionist gimmick”²⁵ to evaluate metaphysics from starting point. Gracia would need to motivate how neutrality would be possible, and that having starting points would be undesirable.

Conditions 3-5: Sui generis character; Disciplinary integration; Necessity

The latter three criteria require less commentary. The third condition simply preserves metaphysics as a genuine discipline. Gracia is correct to assert that if metaphysics were fundamental, then its discipline must be distinct and not simply an “aggregate of claims” made by the other disciplines.²⁶ Gracia's fourth condition is that it mediates across sciences, as the

²⁵ Gracia, 309.

²⁶ Metaphysics cannot be dependent upon the contingent and revisable claims of those sciences it grounds.

diversity of methods and objects imply (a) there is no singular "science" but "sciences",²⁷ and (b) that particular sciences are incapable of fulfilling the role proposed for metaphysics due to their narrow focus and perspective.^{28 29} Fifth, metaphysics must make necessary claims. Progress is the establishment of more accurate necessary claims, even if they can be called into question or improved upon. This condition is certainly desirable, especially if the determinations in metaphysics (if progress is possible) would have import for the disciplines founded upon metaphysics. Hence, I have no major concern here.

Conclusion

Let's take stock, then, what I have attempted to show. First, that the establishment of fundamental science is desirable given historical considerations. Second, that the proposal as stated needs revision on two fronts before it can be a fundamental science: its regarding predication as all-inclusive is actually unintentionally exclusive; its goals should seek to establish *principia* or norms for sciences. Third, when examining the individual conditions, the first has some significant problems in implementation; the second is overly optimistic about neutrality; the third, fourth, and fifth conditions seem necessary to the fundamental project and require no significant revisions. Thus, I have argued that a fundamental science may perhaps be established, but not as Gracia has proposed.

²⁷ Gracia, 309-310. Underlining mine.

²⁸ Gracia, 310.

²⁹ Could a sub-discipline, e.g., philosophy of science or ontology proper, handle this?

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