On Metaphysics

I have been reading Peter Loptson's book *Reality*. It is a presentation of his "common sense" metaphysics, with clear and brief descriptions of other metaphysical views. It is very interesting and a useful addition to the literature.

Some, as he describes, believe that a study of metaphysics is useless, silly, or downright bad because it confuses and leads us into talking nonsense. They say that no metaphysics is true. He disagrees, but only to further his argument that his metaphysics is the true one.

It does seem by the nature of the subject that there is no way we could ever determine which of the many metaphysics that have been developed is true, even if we could understand what it means for a metaphysics to be true. Nonetheless, there is a strong motive for studying and elucidating metaphysical views such as Professor Loptson puts forward.

The reason is that we seem to be unable to live without metaphysical commitments. Or at least without implicit metaphysical commitments, as read from our actions and words.[1] And those shape virtually all we do—though untestable, they are determinant.

If we don't recognize our metaphysical commitments, we are unable even to consider much less imagine alternatives. One who is ignorant of metaphysics is condemned to repeat its mistakes.

When Edgar Alan Poe wrote his short tales he gave the world a new sensibility; he gave each of us an entry to a way of seeing the world that is a way we did not have before. When Plato set out his heaven of abstractions he gave us a way to see the world we did not have before.

The difference between Poe and Plato is that Plato's vision underlies all of life, from spooning desert, to driving a car, to doing mathematics. So, too, does the Buddhist's way of seeing the world, or the nominalist's, or the skeptic's.

The unexamined metaphysics—it's not that it's not worth living, but that it impedes our imaginative world. To reason is to imagine the possibilities, yet how can we if we have no sense of possibilities beyond our unexamined prejudices?

Three cases in point:

Modern logic This is not the logical positivist's heaven of metaphysics-free reasoning. It is based on a now largely unchallenged and unexamined assumption: The world is made up of things. The use of it precludes reasoning that takes account of substances, as in Aristotelian logic, or of processes, or of the world as process.[2]

Cause and effect Here people are more likely to state their metaphysical

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[1] See my essay "Rationality" in my book of essays *The Fundamentals of Argument Analysis* and in *Prescriptive Reasoning* for the issues involved in reading commitments from actions.

[2] See my essay "The World as Process" on the Advanced Reasoning Forum website work in progress section.

assumptions. But they do so only to narrow their conception of cause and effect. Comparing different metaphysics to see how they enter into reasoning about cause and effect yields a more fundamental analysis that serves as the basis to which different metaphysics can be added to give different notions of cause and effect.[3]

Mathematics No story of mathematics built from just one metaphysics has ever satisfactorily answered the basic problems about the nature of mathematics that perplex those who do mathematics. But a more generous view that is open to adding almost any metaphysics gives a convincing story of the fundamentals.[4]

To understand the world, to understand what we do each day with our lives, our work, we need a comparative study of metaphysics. Then—either willy-nilly or by deliberate choice—we adopt a metaphysics. We are better aware of how we see the world, and we are aware of other ways to see it, other ways that may someday be key to an illumination of our own ways of seeing.

Come, let us reason together.

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[3] See my essay "Reasoning about Cause and Effect" in my book of essays *Cause and Effect, Conditionals, Explanations*.

[4] See my essay "Mathematics as the Art of Abstraction" published in *The Argument of Mathematics*, eds. Andrew Aberdein and Ian Dove, Springer-Verlag, 2013, pp. 257–289, and reprinted in both Walter Carnielli's and my *Computability* and in my book of essays *Reasoning in Science and Mathematics*, where that analysis is related to how we can understand reasoning in the sciences.