

## Separating Metaphysical Issues

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**ABSTRACT.** In this paper, I introduce two important distinctions that, when taken seriously, help clarify the dialectic behind metaphysical debates and respond to the objection from incredulity. In particular, I argue that the principle of parsimony in metaphysical theorising should be applied more cautiously.

**Keywords:** Parsimony; Ontology; Indispensability; Ontological Commitment; Quantifier Commitment

### 1. Introduction

Debates regarding the meaningfulness of metaphysical disputes are widespread. For example, Takashi Yagisawa (2025) recently analysed the debate between modal realists and modal actualists. He argues that this debate is philosophically substantive and thus allows for serious, faultless disagreement. However, his position comes with an unwelcome consequence: it is highly unparsimonious. In this paper, I argue that although Yagisawa's view entails significant metaphysical costs, it can be refined into a more viable metaphysical theory. In Section 2, I outline Yagisawa's key claims regarding metaphysical methodology. In Sections 3–6, I argue that while the assumptions he relies on are necessary, they are insufficient by themselves to support his conclusion. I introduce two crucial distinctions that, when properly considered, help clarify Yagisawa's proposal and address the objection from incredulity. Finally, I conclude by suggesting that the principle of parsimony in metaphysical theorizing should be applied with greater caution.

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## 2. An outline of Yagisawa's Proposal

Yagisawa examines the debate through the lens of three pivotal assumptions, A1–A3:

- A1. It is useful to relativise the notion of truth for many philosophical purposes; a sentence is true or false at a truth-relativiser.
- A2. The framework of worlds, which includes both possible and impossible worlds, provides strong candidate truth-relativisers for explicating the truth conditions of many important types of sentences.
- A3. Ontological matters should be understood as matters pertaining to the domain of discourse associated with quantification.

A1 is widely regarded as an uncontroversial consequence of the framework, which asserts that the meaningfulness of, for example,  $\diamond P$  implies a commitment to entities featuring as truth-relativisers. While there is ongoing debate regarding the existence, nature, and epistemic accessibility of these entities, the assumption that propositions require a truth-relativiser is hardly a novel one in philosophy. A2 refines this further by identifying truth-relativisers with possible and impossible worlds. This clarification of A1 is philosophically more contentious, as possible and impossible worlds play a controversial role in determining the truth conditions of modal propositions. Finally, A3 places metaphysical debates within the context of world discourse, suggesting that quantification over the domains of worlds can reveal the nature of metaphysical questions. These three fundamental philosophical assumptions concerning truth-relativisers culminate in Yagisawa's pivotal principle:

*(Non-Vacuous Suppositional Content Realisation Principle):*

For any non-vacuous supposition-based argument of the form, 'Suppose that  $P$ . Then  $Q$ ', some t-index verifies  $P$ , i.e.  $P$  is true with respect to some t-index, and the argument succeeds only if some t-index that verifies  $P$  verifies  $Q$ . (Yagisawa, 2025, p. 4)

In this context, the t-index serves as a shorthand for truth-relativisers, referring broadly to modal space and, more specifically, to possible and impossible worlds.

Importantly, the three assumptions outlined above, when combined with the application of the Non-Vacuous Suppositional Content Realisation Principle (henceforth SCR), extend beyond mere logical and semantic considerations. Adhering to these assumptions requires substantial metaphysical commitments, rather than just linguistic competence or surface-level understanding. This means that engaging in

serious metaphysical discourse triggers ‘a potentially endless series of ever-expanding ontological commitments.’ (Yagisawa 2025, p. 2).

A natural reaction to this set of assumptions, followed by the principle, is immediate: it seems incredible, metaphysically unparsimonious, and even internally incoherent. One simple reason for this is that following the assumptions in debates about incompatible metaphysical theories leads to insurmountable metaphysical commitments. Specifically, the debate, when framed in terms of worlds, extends beyond them and culminates in a more comprehensive understanding of truth-relativisers – modal spaces. Yagisawa demonstrates this result as follows:

An actualist may begin a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against Lewisian modal realism, for example, by supposing that possible worlds are spatiotemporally unified concrete wholes. Given the Non-Vacuous Suppositional Content Realisation Principle, the content of this supposition is realized by some t-index, so possible worlds are spatiotemporally unified concrete wholes at some t-index. Let *i* be such a t-index. Since the actualist thinks of  $\mathfrak{M}$  as containing maximally consistent propositions, the actualist does not think that *i* is  $\mathfrak{M}$ , hence the actualist is committed to some modal space alternative to  $\mathfrak{M}$ . Thus, simply by making the supposition for *reductio*, the actualist is committed to a modal space other than what the actualist takes to be the actual modal space. This is so, whether the *reductio* argument succeeds or not. (Yagisawa 2025, p.11)

From a methodological perspective, accepting modal spaces enhances the expressive power of world semantics but raises significant concerns about parsimony. This is because A2 explicitly introduces worlds as entities functioning as truth-relativisers. When combined with A3, this view incurs substantial ontological commitments. Namely, adequately capturing metaphysical debates requires the domain of possible and impossible worlds to be sufficiently expansive to accommodate any metaphysical claim. This line of reasoning ultimately leads to a dilemma about the nature of modality – one that is closely tied to the very nature of worlds themselves<sup>1</sup>. I will examine this dilemma in the following section.

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<sup>1</sup> An anonymous reviewer raises an important point here. Specifically, Yagisawa’s criticism can be resisted by fictionalists, sceptics about modality, or proponents of a permissive account of supposition, according to which the limits of the supposer’s commitments are less strict than in other methods and, importantly, are metaphysically harmless. I take this point seriously, but I will raise some metaphysical issues in Section 3.

### 3. The Dilemma

The dilemma is as follows: to accommodate metaphysical discourse, we must either adopt a unified theory of worlds or embrace what might be termed *ontological pluralism*. The first horn of the dilemma holds that a unified account – such as modal realism – can ground modal claims about metaphysically incompatible aspects of reality, including those captured by ersatzist frameworks. However, as Vander Laan observes, ‘[T]he Achilles’ heel of a concretist theory of impossible worlds is the fact that there are certain things which concrete worlds cannot represent inaccurately...’ (Vander Laan, 1997, p. 607). On the other hand, many intuitively compelling modal claims remain inadequately represented within *ersatzist* frameworks, owing to the expressive limitations of world-making language (Lewis, 1986, §3). One such limitation concerns the treatment of *alien individuals* and *alien properties* – that is, individuals that do not exist in the actual world and properties uninstantiated within it. While ersatzist theories attempt to accommodate such possibilities, they have been argued to offer only a partial and constrained characterisation. Given these shortcomings, the representational adequacy of any unified ontology – whether grounded in modal realism or constructed through modal ersatzism – becomes a matter of legitimate philosophical concern.

Ontological pluralism, roughly, is the view that an adequate account of reality requires multiple quantifiers that cannot be understood as ranging over a single, unified domain. At first glance, embracing ontological pluralism appears to avoid the descriptive limitations of a unified ontology. However, it does so at the cost of significantly expanding one’s ontological commitments. Given the acceptance of *A3*, the application of the SCR yields a plurality of modal spaces, each corresponding to distinct kinds of metaphysical commitments. Better put, the ontological pluralist is compelled to endorse various incompatible ontological theories, thereby disregarding Occam’s Razor and rendering the position metaphysically extravagant.

The two horns of the dilemma present a difficult choice: either one commits to a unified theory of possible worlds, which faces certain representational limitations, or one embraces ontological pluralism, which involves an extravagant and potentially unwieldy ontological commitment. Given these challenges, a pressing question arises: can a middle ground be found that preserves the strengths of both views while avoiding their respective pitfalls? Some philosophers have attempted to refine modal realism or ersatzism to address these concerns (Yagisawa, 1988), while others have explored hybrid approaches that incorporate elements of ontological pluralism without endorsing its more radical commitments (Berto, 2010). There is, however, another way to reframe the debate. In what follows, I argue that the debate need not

be regarded with such suspicion, provided we clarify the thesis in a more modest form. In particular, two distinctions – often conflated in the literature – should be kept separate: the nature/extent distinction and the distinction between *ontological* and *quantifier* commitment. I will examine each in turn.

#### 4. The Nature and the Extent Question: Separation 1

To begin with the first distinction, philosophers frequently talk past one another when discussing the accuracy of analysis. Using modality – specifically, possibility – as an example, it is crucial to distinguish between two separate questions: What possibility is? and What possibility there is? Drawing on the exchange between (Divers, 2013), (Efrid & Stoneham, 2008), and (Cameron, 2012), we can articulate this distinction – henceforth *SE1* – as follows:

- A. The nature question and the extent question should be distinguished and either
- A\*. The proper office of an analysis of modality is to answer the nature question, or
- A\*\*. The proper office of an analysis of modality is to answer the nature question as well as to answer the extent question.

Proponents of A\* maintain that the extent question is irrelevant to providing an adequate analysis of possibility. Whatever the extent of the space of worlds may be, they have it – there are no prior constraints on the nature of worlds. In other words, metaphysicians need not establish a tight correspondence between the worlds that exist, on the one hand, and what we (intuitively) take to be possible, on the other (Cameron, 2012, p. 6). More broadly, there is no requirement that an account of the nature of worlds must entail their extent. These are, on this view, methodologically and explanatorily independent questions – and only the former is relevant to a proper analysis of modality. While it is not to say that the extent question is unimportant, it does not figure into the analysis of modality *per se*.

In contrast, proponents of A\*\* argue that any adequate analysis of possibility must consider both the extent and the nature of possibility. Divers presents several reasons why these two questions should not be treated separately. One reason arises from the definitional schema of possibility, (P):

- (P) It is possible that *P* if and only if there exists a possible world, *w*, such that at *w*, *P*.

As it stands, (P) is neither an explicit schema about the nature of possible worlds nor about their extent. However, when one fills in the role of ‘possible world’ with, for example, the modal realist’s conception, the question of extent becomes strongly linked to the question of nature. Divers argues for this connection as follows:

For possibility is defined, in [P], as unrestricted existence. But that something or other unrestrictedly exists is an inevitable commitment of a Lewisian-Quinean metaphysical-base sentence given its logical-form. So a special feature of the case of possibility is that there is no option of going down the classic ‘error-theoretic’ route of accepting the definition but then claiming further that nothing in the metaphysical base provides for the definition being satisfied. One cannot consistently combine this definition of possibility with the commitment that nothing is (really) possible (Divers, 2013, p.191)

Here, ‘error-theoretic’ should be understood in a metaphysical rather than an epistemic sense. Thus, if one accepts  $A^{**}$ , they are also asserting that no two metaphysically incompatible commitments can satisfy one’s definition of possibility. In other words, it is inappropriate to claim that a variety of metaphysical frameworks can perform equally well in the accurate analysis of possibility. This means that once we have settled the nature question, we ipso facto settle the procedure that identifies the extent question: the two are inseparable, so to speak.

A further reason for insisting on the inseparability of the two questions is the need to align with pre-theoretical modal intuitions. Even if we agree that various unorthodox views on the extent of possibility, along with postulates about the number of worlds, are internally consistent with modal realism, this does not ensure that they ‘function together as the players of relevant roles... to deliver an analysis of possibility that is remotely successful by Lewisian criteria’ (Divers, 2013, p. 192). Specifically, these criteria determine whether to expand the commitments, contract the modal opinions, or do both, in order to achieve the best balance between economy and conservativeness. Thus, what proponents of  $A^*$  overlook are the criteria that, only when the nature and extent questions are considered together, correctly specify the roles that possible worlds play in the analysis.

Although *SE1* raises several issues, some observations suggest that non-separatism better captures the motivation behind the SCR. The extent question pertains to the content of metaphysical theories, rather than merely defining possibility. Since separating these stands in tension with A1–A3, proponents of the principle should acknowledge that a systematic approach provides a more informative framework. This suggests that a non-separatist interpretation is not merely preferable, but essential for preserving the adequacy of the analysis.

## 5. Ontological Commitment and Quantifier Commitment: Separation 2

Another important distinction, often overlooked in the literature, concerns the so-called *indispensability argument*. While the argument gained prominence primarily in the philosophy of mathematics, its applicability can easily be extended to metaphysics as well. In the former context, the argument proceeds as follows:

- (P1) We ought to be ontologically committed to all and only those entities that are indispensable to our best theories of the world.
- (P2) Mathematical entities are indispensable to our best theories of the world.

Therefore:

- (C) We ought to be ontologically committed to the existence of mathematical entities (Colyvan, 1998).

In the latter case, the same reasoning applied to mathematical entities can be extended to metaphysical entities. Just as the argument for ontological commitment to mathematical entities follows from their indispensability to our best theories of the world, a similar case can be made for metaphysical entities. If metaphysical entities are deemed indispensable to our best theories, then by the same reasoning, we ought to be ontologically committed to their existence. The core idea is that, just as mathematical entities are integral to the structure of our scientific and theoretical frameworks, metaphysical entities play a crucial role in our broader understanding of reality. Therefore, the argument for ontological commitment to metaphysical entities mirrors the argument for mathematical entities.

Here, the entities in question differ across competing metaphysical frameworks. These may include concrete possibilia (Lewis, 1986), states of affairs (Armstrong, 1989), propositions (Adams, 1974), or properties (Stalnaker, 1976). The crucial point is that, given the SCR and the validity of the indispensability argument, the resulting metaphysical debate yields highly unparsimonious consequences.

At first glance, the above arguments appear to concern the existence of entities of certain kinds. However, Azzouni (2004) complicates this issue. He introduces the so-called separation thesis (henceforth *SE2*), which distinguishes quantifier commitment from ontological commitment. According to this distinction, the entities a true theory quantifies over do not necessarily reflect its ontological commitments. As Azzouni explains, even the most well-supported theories do not necessarily provide insight into the actual existence of the entities they posit. Truth in a theoretical sense does not equate to ontological reality. For instance, there is a crucial difference

between being quantifier-committed to the existence of possible worlds and being ontologically committed to their existence. While the indispensability argument may justify the former, the question of whether these possible worlds truly exist remains separate. In short, quantifier commitment does not imply ontological commitment.

A crucial aspect of *SE2* is its challenge to the ‘no choice’ problem, which is typically framed as a conditional: If a theory you accept as true states that certain entities (*Fs*) exist, then you must believe in their existence (Colyvan, 2005). *SE2*, however, disputes this by arguing that one can acknowledge a theory’s usefulness or empirical adequacy without endorsing the ontological reality of its proposed entities. That is to say, simply quantifying over entities does not necessarily imply an ontological commitment to their existence. Instead, the answers to ontological questions remain socially relative, pragmatically burdened, and, unfortunately, virtually impossible to settle (Bueno & Shalkowski, 2004, p. 101). Specifically, one can quantify over possible worlds without committing to their metaphysical reality. This perspective allows for a more flexible approach to theoretical commitments, offering a potential solution to the ‘no choice’ problem. This, in essence, is *SE2*.

## 6. Balancing *SE1* and *SE2*

Where do *SE1* and *SE2* lead us? One takeaway is that the objection concerning the violation of parsimony, which arises from the three assumptions above and the SCR, should be considered only after addressing the importance of both the nature and extent questions. The second takeaway is that the indispensability argument, which determines our commitments, also has a separatist interpretation. One might therefore wonder which combinations of the separatist’s duals best capture the practice of metaphysics, while remaining uncontroversial with respect to parsimony as a theoretical virtue.

First, consider  $A^*$  and the ontological reading of *SE2*. The ontological reading of *SE2*, in this context, commits one to the existence of entities of the respective kind – whether these are possibilities, states of affairs, or some other metaphysical entities. This commitment raises significant concerns about the ontological implications of such a position. Although the analysis remains deliberately silent on the specific extent of these commitments – i.e., how many entities are involved – the position still suffers from a fundamental issue: it leads to an (ideologically) unparsimonious metaphysical framework.

Alternatively, the dual  $A^*$  and the quantifier interpretation of *SE2* take a more modest stance. They commit their proponents to the existence of various kinds of possible worlds but say little about the entities that fulfill the roles of these worlds. An analogy can be drawn along the following lines:

Suppose that our best theories of fictional discourse, as well as our practices with fiction, require the quantification over fictional characters. Perhaps the best way of making sense of the Sherlock Holmes stories is by quantifying over a detective who solved difficult cases in brilliant ways. Clearly, we incur a quantifier commitment here. But we would immediately deny the claim that we are ontologically committed to Sherlock Holmes! The natural response would be to acknowledge that even if we quantify over fictional characters, we have no reason to believe that they exist (Bueno & Shalkowski, 2004, p. 100)

To put it another way, simply quantifying over entities does not necessarily entail an ontological commitment to their existence. Similarly, when it comes to possible worlds, one can quantify over them without committing to their metaphysical reality. This approach offers a more flexible and pragmatic interpretation of modal discourse, sidestepping the heavy gical burdens associated with more robust realist perspectives. The question however remains: how the SCR is properly justified?

The most problematic position, purportedly represented by the SCR, is one that simultaneously endorses  $A^{**}$  and adopts the ontological interpretation of  $SE2$ . This position poses a significant issue because, as I see it, it aligns with the original concern about parsimony – the principle that, simply put, theories should avoid unnecessary complexity. The core problem lies in the fact that this view forces its proponents to accept an extensive range of ontological commitments, each corresponding to a different metaphysical framework and its extent. This not only undermines theoretical simplicity but also raises concerns about the coherence and explanatory power of the overall philosophical stance.

However, one might consider an alternative approach – namely, the combination of  $A^{**}$  and the quantifier interpretation of  $SE2$ . This perspective enables a crucial distinction: rather than committing to the ontological reality of the entities posited by various metaphysical theories, one can engage with these theories purely at the level of quantification. Put differently, one can entertain, even for the purposes of a *reductio ad absurdum*, a range of competing metaphysical frameworks and all the consequences they entail, without necessarily accepting the existence of the entities they introduce. As a result, this approach provides a way to navigate metaphysical discourse while adhering more closely to the principle of parsimony, avoiding the inflation of ontological commitments beyond what is, according to Occam's razor, necessary.

I believe that the last dual provides the most charitable reading of the SCR. It strikes a balance between the expressive motivations of the principle and the metaphysical boundaries it implies, even without further articulation. This approach not only preserves the theoretical flexibility necessary for robust philosophical inquiry

but also mitigates the risk of ontological overcommitment. By maintaining a distinction between quantification and existence, one can engage rigorously with competing metaphysical frameworks without being compelled to adopt a specific ontological stance. As a result, this interpretation of the principle allows a more measured and precise engagement with metaphysical discourse, while respecting the constraints of parsimony and conceptual economy<sup>2</sup>.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the conditions for serious disagreement in metaphysics initially led to unwelcome commitments. However, it is disputable what these commitments (really) are and how they should be interpreted within different philosophical frameworks. Some argue that these commitments impose rigid ontological constraints, while a more charitable reading allows for a more flexible and evolving discourse. Specifically, taking *SE1* and *SE2* seriously demonstrates that, although the nature of metaphysical disagreement remains an open question, the violation of parsimony as a serious consequence requires an additional argument.

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<sup>2</sup> Still, one might raise two concerns: a tension between *A3* and *SE2*, arguing that *A3* requires ontological, not just quantifier, commitment, full stop; and the worry that the proposal is tailored to address only one very specific type of metaphysical difficulty. Regarding the former, fortunately, the proposal can accommodate Yagisawa's account of existence, according to which 'what exists is what is in the domain' (Yagisawa, 2010, p. 51). This prioritisation of the domain over what exists within it helps resolve the tension. As for the latter, one might interpret the proposal as a guide for any metaphysical theory – simply leave the blank spaces in *SE1* and *SE2*, plug in whatever theory one holds, and find the best combination to serve all the required theoretical purposes.

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