

Engagement
and
Metaphysical
Dissatisfaction

Modality and Value

BARRY STROUD

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2011

Contents

1 The Metaphysical Project, 3

2 Causation, 20

3 Necessity, 59

4 Value, 90

5 Indispensability, 125

6 Metaphysical Dissatisfaction, 145

Index, 161

The Metaphysical Project

However much we come to know or think we know about the world it is possible and sometimes desirable to try to stand back from it and take a more reflective attitude toward our conception of the way things are. We can perhaps even feel a certain general uneasiness in our unexamined acquiescence in familiar and well-entrenched ways of thinking. That we think the world is a certain way is one thing; the world's really being the way we think it is is something different, and something more. This thought alone can be enough to encourage critical assessment of the credentials of our ways of thinking of the world, however familiar and fundamental they might be.

Asking whether things really stand in the world in the ways we think we have good reason to believe they do can be an expression of a human desire to gain a certain kind of satisfying general understanding of ourselves in relation to the world around us. It is in that respect a metaphysical question. Kant thought an urge toward metaphysical understanding is “a natural disposition of human reason,” an “inward need” that everyone, or at least every reflective person, feels. He thought we are no more likely to abandon metaphysics in some form or other than we are to decide to stop breathing.¹ The need is not simply general curiosity or a desire to understand ourselves. The metaphysical aspiration Kant had in mind is a desire to understand ourselves in a certain distinctive way.

1. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (ed. G. Hatfield), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 118.

The reflections this leads to can proceed in very general terms, about some of the things we all believe or take for granted in everyday life. For instance, we often believe that one thing depends on or happens because of another, or that if a certain thing were to happen a certain other thing would happen as well. A billiard ball goes into a pocket because another ball hits it, or a ball would go into a pocket if it were hit in a certain way. We also accept some things as being necessarily true, with no possibility of their having been otherwise; seven plus five could not possibly have been anything other than twelve. And in doing something we favor one course of action over others, or regard some things as better or more desirable than the alternatives. We eat rather than going to bed, or decide to help someone in distress.

It is possible to find by philosophical reflection that in these thoughts or beliefs or responses we go beyond anything that is strictly speaking so in reality. To put it in more dramatic form, it can be brought home to us that in the world as it is independently of all human beings and their responses to the world, there *are* no dependences between things, no necessary way things absolutely must be, and nothing that is good or bad, better or more desirable than anything else.

This is to be understood in each case as a metaphysical discovery; a conclusion about the way things are. The idea is not just that we can never *know* or be certain or even have good reason to hold any of these everyday beliefs. The causal connections, the necessities, and the value or worth of things that we appear to believe in are said not to be part of independent reality at all. The idea is that it is only something about us and our responses to the world that leads us to think in these distinctive ways, not anything that is so in the world itself that we think about. Metaphysical reflection is meant to reveal how those thoughts and beliefs of ours are really related to the independent world they appear to be about. So it can seem equally possible to be led by metaphysical reflection to reject such negative conclusions and to arrive instead at the positive verdict that the world as it is independently of us and our responses really does contain the kinds of causal connections, or necessities, or worth and value that we ordinarily believe in.

In this book I want to investigate this kind of metaphysical reflection to see how its conclusions are to be reached and what support can be found for them. That is obviously not a task I or anyone could hope to complete. But I want to focus as much as possible on the activity or enterprise of reflecting on ourselves in this way, not simply on what appear to be its results. One element I concentrate on is the beliefs and attitudes we actually have about causation, necessity, and values that the metaphysical conclusions appear to rely on. Can they

be understood in a way that supports a satisfying metaphysical conclusion about them?

My main question is whether or how any active, engaged human person who operates with beliefs of those kinds can carry out a reflective philosophical project like this and arrive at metaphysical conclusions he or she can believe and find illuminating. Could anyone who thinks and acts in the world as we all do consistently understand his own and other people's beliefs about causation, necessity, and values as nothing more than what a negative metaphysical verdict about them says they are? And if not, would that give us something we could recognize as positive metaphysical reassurance about the status of those beliefs? Would that put us in a position to declare causal dependence, necessity, and the values of things to be really part of the independent world after all?

I take up these questions in the hope of gaining a better understanding of what metaphysics is or can be and of what we can reasonably expect from it.

One familiar kind of curiosity about our conception of the world can arise out of uncertainty about the support we have for our current beliefs and attitudes. Do we really have good reason to continue to believe all the different kinds of things we believe about the world? Questions of this kind have certainly played a prominent role in philosophical reflection over the years. They are questions about the basis or grounds of our believing or knowing what we do about the world, not simply about our conception of the world itself. Such epistemological questions cannot be kept completely and forever separate from a more directly metaphysical concern with what the world is like, but it is possible, at least for a time, to separate the two. Metaphysical curiosity can express itself even about a conception of the world that we think is as firmly based and well supported as any conception of the world could be.

It is possible to take a certain kind of critical attitude even toward what we take to be knowledge and thoughts and beliefs and feelings acquired from the best sources in the most reliable ways. Metaphysical reflection seeks to subject that whole rich conception of the world to a certain kind of independent scrutiny and assessment. It is to that extent a meta-reflection. It comes after, and reflects critically upon, whatever we have already come to accept in our efforts to make sense of the world. It is an attempt to stand back and not take for granted those parts of our conception of the world that are for the moment under metaphysical scrutiny. Our questions are then directed toward our very conception of the way things are, not to our grounds for holding it.

But the metaphysical aspiration is not simply a desire to know what our conception of the world actually is. Not that an accurate description of our thoughts and attitudes about the world is easily come by, or would be of little interest if we had one. But however thorough and accurate a description of our thoughts and beliefs we came up with, it would not give us the kind of metaphysical understanding I think we seek. It would tell us at best only something about ourselves and our conception of the way things are. But we also want to understand how we and our thoughts about the world stand in relation to a world that is not ourselves. The question is about the relation between the conception we have of the world and the world itself. We hope to ask how things really are in the world by examining the adequacy, accuracy, or comprehensiveness of the conception of the world that we know we have.

It is easy to miss or to misconstrue the distinctively philosophical or metaphysical character of this kind of enterprise. It can look like just one aspect of the attempt to know or understand how things are in general. The logical positivists of the Vienna Circle in the 1930s were not misled by appearances in that way. They drew attention to the very special character of metaphysics and argued against its very possibility on the grounds that it is an expression of a distinctive but unsatisfiable aspiration. For them metaphysics was a search for a kind of knowledge different from anything everyday experience or experimental science could ever provide. It was an attempt to reach above or beyond or somehow behind the best that empirical study of the world can give us, and yet to say something significant about what is really so in the world. For the positivists, the very conception of that task was enough to imply that it could not possibly succeed.

One thing I think the logical positivists were right about was their recognition that metaphysics is not just one among many different ways of studying the world. It is a special and distinctively *philosophical* study of the way things are. And on the positivists' map of all possible varieties of human knowledge there was simply no place for any such philosophical study. That map made room only for empirically verifiable propositions about the world on the one hand and propositions that can be seen to be necessarily and so 'analytically' true on the other. Philosophy was not an empirical study of the world, so any knowledge it might come up with could find its place on that map only as the 'analysis' of something else that could also find a place there. Philosophy could yield at best only 'analytic' knowledge that is therefore 'empty of factual content,' and so completely silent about how things actually are. But the neat dividing lines of that suspiciously simple map

of human knowledge have themselves been brought into question, not least by the undying force of the metaphysical aspiration itself.

The anti-metaphysical positivists wanted to eliminate what they regarded as mere ‘pseudo-questions’ or empirically unsheddable and so unreal ‘disputes’ that only seem to be about the way things are. Such apparent questions are empirically completely idle, with no possible criteria for settling them one way or the other, so no putative ‘answers’ to them could be part of what anyone could know. Speculation and elaborate intellectual construction beyond the limits of all possible verification might offer pleasant or even reassuring pictures of the world and our position in it, but it could give us nothing that anyone could have reason to believe.

Like the logical positivists who came after him, Kant had not thought highly of what metaphysics had been able to achieve in the past either. And he saw no hope for the future in anything like the kind of speculative reflection metaphysics had engaged in up till his time. But Kant thought “to forego [metaphysics] entirely is impossible,” so he tried to work out the only way in which the kind of satisfaction we seek can be achieved. He sought to lay down once and for all the conditions of the possibility of any metaphysical knowledge or understanding of the world. The key was to investigate the conditions of our having the very thoughts and knowledge of the world that we want to subject to metaphysical assessment.

What Kant prescribed along these lines is an enterprise of forbidding complexity. But it has one feature that it seems to me any metaphysical inquiry worth taking seriously must have. It is what might be called metaphysics *from within*. It starts with the thoughts and beliefs we actually have about the world and investigates the conditions of our having them. Even if it turns out that no illuminating metaphysical conclusions can finally be reached, there seems to be no alternative to at least beginning in this way. Unless we are prepared to make everything up as we go along, we have no choice but to start from where we are now, with what we already believe and think we know about the world, and see if metaphysical reflection on that conception can yield reliable new understanding of what is really so.

This kind of reflection promises a conception of reality that is an improvement of what we start with. We start out from everything we believe or have any opinions about and ask how much of that body of belief, or what parts of it, express something that is actually so in the world we take those beliefs and attitudes to be about. Whatever is found to pass the test receives positive metaphysical assessment; it will have been found (by our best philosophical lights) to be part of

what is really so in the world. Ways we think things are that are found to fail the test in one way or another will have been exposed as not really capturing anything that is so in the world after all, or at least not capturing what they might have seemed to capture before metaphysical reflection. The goal is to achieve an enhanced—a metaphysically corrected—conception of what the world is like. It is meant to tell us, contrary to the way we (perhaps uncritically) took things to be at the beginning, how things really are.

What looks like a simple and uncontroversial example of this kind of thinking is expressed in the familiar adage “Beauty lies only in the eye of the beholder.” Most of us think that there are many beautiful things in the world, or at least that some things are more beautiful than others. We seek that beauty, and enjoy it when we find it. Of course beauty can take many different forms. But when we ascribe beauty to things of different kinds we appear to believe that, for all their differences, the things are nonetheless beautiful, each in its own way. The familiar maxim says that what we appear to think and say in making such judgments cannot be taken for granted as giving the best understanding of what is really so when we think and speak about beauty in those ways. The maxim purports to cut below the surface of our accepted ways of thinking and speaking about the beauty of things to give an improved or corrected understanding of the relation between those thoughts or beliefs we express and the world they are in some sense about.

The observation that beauty lies only in the eye of the beholder can be seen as metaphysical in purporting to tell us what the world to which we appear to ascribe beauty is really like or what it really contains. Or rather it tells us what the world does *not* really contain. It says the world does not really contain any objects that have a property of being beautiful or more beautiful than other objects. More precisely, it says that no objects have any such property independently of all “beholders’” responses to them. Beauty is *only* in the eye of the beholder; it is not something possessed by any objects independently of the responses that lead beholders to call them beautiful.

This conclusion is and is meant to be negative or deflating in a certain respect. It says that beauty is *only* something or other, not everything we might perhaps have thought it is. It gives beauty a certain dependent status by placing it on one side of what can be seen as a dividing line between “beholders” and their responses to the world on the one hand and the world on the other side of that line that is as it is independently of anyone’s responses to it. However things might otherwise be on their own on the far side of that line—independently of all conscious subjects

and their responses—there are no beautiful objects, according to this picture. Nor, for the same reason, are there any ugly objects either. Something that we “beholders” appear to think or imply in saying that a thing is beautiful or ugly is denied or taken away or somehow qualified by this metaphysical verdict. It says that whether something is beautiful or not, and what sort of thing the beauty we all appear to believe in is, depends on something that is true only of “us”—something on the “beholders” side of the dividing line.

It is easier to feel that you get the general point behind this familiar maxim than it is to formulate a reasonably clear and defensible version of it that reveals exactly how our thoughts of and responses to the beauty of things go beyond or in some other way fail to capture what is so in the independent world. That is partly because we do not at the moment possess an accurate account of how we actually think of and respond to the beauty of things, and it would not be easy to come up with such a description. But even if we had one it would not be enough to reveal the metaphysical point. We would also need a conception of what the world is really like on its own, independent of all human thoughts and responses. Only then could we appreciate the relation between the way we think things are in our thoughts about beauty and the way things really are. We could then understand how beauty as we think of it fits into the world described by a metaphysically purified conception that includes only what is really so.

Getting into position to make such a discovery is a more complicated task than it might look. We do not begin metaphysical reflection about beauty with an already-formulated conception of how things really are. If we did, we could simply consult that conception of the world to see how our thoughts and responses about beauty fit into it. But we cannot start there. We can achieve such a purified conception of independent reality, if at all, only by starting with everything we think and feel about the whole world, including our beliefs about the beauty of things, and somehow precipitating out of that totality something we can regard as a metaphysically corrected or improved conception of what is really so. That step is unavoidable, given what I have called metaphysics from within; we must start with everything we accept and refine it down to what we can see to be really so. So even to arrive at a conception of independent reality against which to assess the status of beauty as we think of it we would need an accurate understanding not only of our thoughts about beauty, but of all our other ways of thinking of and responding to the world as well.

It is perhaps easy to feel that we do not really need to engage in such elaborate reflections in order to grasp the basic point of the familiar

maxim about beauty. I think there is a strong presumption that, whatever our ways of thinking about beauty turned out to be, and whatever the world fully independent of us happened to be like, beauty could not really be anything other than *some* kind of byproduct of “beholders’” responses to a beauty-free independent world. It is easy to feel not only that the traditional maxim is basically right, but that beauty could not really be anything else; that it must lie somehow only in the “eye” of the beholder.

I think it is worth trying to get to the bottom of this kind of feeling or reaction. I would like to understand where such a strong sense of metaphysical conviction comes from and what lies behind it. What makes it seem simply undeniable about beauty, or about anything else? How does this special kind of metaphysical insight or reflection work, and what can reasonably be expected from it?

In later chapters I try to determine, with respect to three of our most fundamental and pervasive ways of thinking of the world, whether it is possible to find either that those thoughts or attitudes go beyond everything that is strictly speaking so in reality or, on the contrary, that the world really is as we take it to be in those respects. Can we carry out this kind of reflective project and consistently reach a metaphysically satisfying conclusion? Can we find that there is nothing in independent reality corresponding to fundamental beliefs and attitudes we know we have? And if we cannot, does that give us positive metaphysical reassurance that the world really is as those beliefs and attitudes represent it to be after all?

The apparently uncontroversial case of beauty seems to support at least the general feasibility of some such project. But to reach any satisfactory metaphysical outcome even in that case we would need good answers to three interconnected questions. The first question is how it is known or how it is to be established that the metaphysical verdict is correct. What shows that beauty is only in the eye of the beholder and is nothing present on its own in the world as it is fully independently of all beholders’ responses? This question is often simply ignored. It can seem obvious or beyond question that beauty itself could be nothing in the independent world. But finding or declaring it obvious is just another expression of the metaphysical conviction that the traditional maxim about beauty simply must be right. It is not an independent reason in support of that conclusion.

Widespread and apparently irresolvable disagreements about the beauty of things are often invoked in support of the maxim. But disagreements, even wide cultural differences, alone are not enough. It

depends as well on what explains whatever differences there are. Further support might come from the idea not just that people disagree but that there is no possible way to settle the questions of beauty on which they differ. That in turn can easily lead to the conclusion that there is no real question at issue in judgments of beauty—that there is nothing in the world for different beholders to be right or wrong about. That is in effect what the traditional maxim about beauty says or implies. But what shows that it is not possible to settle the question of a thing's beauty, or that there is no such thing in the world to be right or wrong about?

It will perhaps be said that it is impossible to settle the question because judgments of beauty are judgments of taste. And, according to another familiar maxim, there is no disputing matters of taste. This cannot mean that people do not in fact dispute matters involving taste, since they do it all the time. It is true that judgments of beauty do require a certain taste or distinctive sensitivity on the part of those who make them. But some distinctive sensitivities or discriminative capacities are required for virtually every judgment we make. We could not even perceive the shapes or sizes of the objects around us if we did not have the appropriate perceptual sensitivities. But that does not suggest that the shapes and sizes of the things we perceive lie only in the eye or other sense organ of the beholder, or that the objects that cause those perceptions do not really have shapes or sizes.

Perhaps the maxim about beauty rests rather on the idea that *nothing more* than the effects objects have on our minds or sensibilities is relevant to the judgments we make about the beauty of things—that the “beholders’” responses themselves are enough to account for all the differences among different judgments of beauty. This rests on a certain understanding of what people say or think when they make judgments of beauty. It says that in declaring something to be beautiful we do no more than express a certain feeling or reaction we have to the thing, or we announce or describe a feeling we have toward it. If judgments of beauty are to be understood in this way, the feelings or responses in question would have to be specified more fully; not just any reaction we have to something is relevant to our regarding it as beautiful. But if the appropriate feelings or responses could be accurately specified, this way of understanding our judgments of beauty would support the conclusion that there is nothing in the independent world for different judges of beauty to disagree about. Whether something is beautiful or not would depend on how human beings do or would respond to it. It could then be said, with admissible license, that the beauty they speak of lies only in the eyes of beholders.

But is this actually true of our judgments of beauty? This is a question about what we actually say or think or judge in speaking of the beauty of things. This is the second of the three questions to be asked about this kind of metaphysical enterprise. It is the question of what the thoughts or beliefs that are subject to metaphysical assessment are really like, and how they work. We need a correct answer to this question in order to accept the traditional maxim about the beauty we believe in. What *do* we say or think or judge when we declare things to be beautiful?

I said that this is not an easy question to answer. But for all its difficulty, it appears to be a more or less straightforward question of fact. It is a question to which anyone who would reach a reliable metaphysical verdict about beauty must have an answer, since that verdict purports to tell us something about the relation between our ways of thinking and speaking about beauty on the one hand and a reality that is independent of us and our responses on the other. The acceptability of any metaphysical conclusion arrived at in this way therefore depends on whether what it says or implies about our actual ways of thinking can be seen to be correct. Metaphysical reflection directed toward ways of thinking that are not the ways we actually think of the world would yield at best an assessment of some other thoughts and beliefs, not ours. It could not give us the illumination we seek about our own conception of the world. At worst it would not be an assessment of anyone's actual thoughts or beliefs at all, but simply a declaration that the world really is a certain way. That is the kind of thing that gives metaphysics a bad name.

As a matter of fact it seems to me that in declaring something to be beautiful we are not typically simply expressing or even describing a feeling we have in response to the thing. We do often have certain feelings in the presence of a beautiful object, many of which are aroused by the object itself, but in saying or thinking that the object is beautiful we appear to be predicating something of the object or thinking of it in a certain way. What we ascribe to the object in those assertions seems to be just what we ask or wonder about when we ask or wonder whether a certain object is beautiful. We can ask that question about an object that is nowhere near us and from which we get no relevant feelings one way or the other at the moment. We ask or wonder whether the object has what we would ascribe to it if we were to think it is beautiful.

Perhaps in ascribing beauty to something we can be understood to ascribe to it a tendency or power to produce feelings or reactions of certain kinds in us or in certain kinds of perceivers. That is something an object can have whether anyone is actually perceiving it or not. This too, if the appropriate feelings could be accurately specified, would be consistent with the traditional maxim about beauty. Whether an object

has such a power or not depends in part on what the perceivers whose feelings or responses are relevant are like. If “beholders” had been different in certain ways from the ways they actually are now, objects that now have the power to affect perceivers in certain ways would not have had the power to do that. So on this understanding of judgments of beauty, whether something is beautiful or not would depend on what certain perceivers are like, and so in that sense the beauty would lie only in the eye of the beholder.

But perhaps our most considered judgments of beauty are to be understood in some other way. Could it be that in ascribing beauty to an object we predicate of it a property or feature that we do not regard as completely explainable or definable solely in terms of the responses of beholders or of an object’s power to produce them? This would not mean that the feelings or reactions we have to objects we regard as beautiful are not important, even essential. But on this kind of view those feelings, or the prospect of our getting them, would be something that leads us to think of objects as beautiful and to seek beauty and to enjoy it when we find it, but it would not be what we ascribe to an object in speaking of it as beautiful in the ways we do. In thinking of an object as beautiful we could be thinking of it as having some quality or feature that is not explainable in terms of feelings or responses alone. Its beauty could be something different from its having a tendency to produce certain responses, even though it does have such a tendency. We would then be predicating of objects we regard as beautiful something that is not equivalent or fully reducible to anything that is true only of beholders or of the powers objects have to produce them.

Whether we do think and speak of beautiful things in this way—and if we do, what we thereby say and think about them—is a factual question about our judgments of beauty: what do we actually say or think in ascribing beauty to something? It is the second of what I have called the three critical questions. The effort to answer this question in the right way is what raises the third question. Reaching a negative metaphysical conclusion about beauty requires that we be able to find that the description of our ways of thinking of the beauty of things that the metaphysical reflection relies on is actually correct. We must be able to recognize ourselves and our actual beliefs and responses in the ways of thinking that the project subjects to metaphysical assessment. And we must be able to find that description correct prior to and independently of accepting any particular metaphysical verdict. The acceptability of such a verdict depends in part on the accuracy of the description given of our thought in the reflection that is meant to lead to that verdict.

The third question to be asked is whether we can find that we do in fact think of and respond to beauty in the ways the metaphysical reflection depends on and at the same time accept what the metaphysical verdict says: that there is no such thing as beauty in the world independently of all beholders' responses to things. This is not simply a question of whether two different propositions are consistent or not. It is not the question whether it could be true that we all think there are many beautiful things in the world even though there are in fact no beautiful things in the world. It is perfectly possible for us to believe something even though it is not true. What I want to bring into question is whether we who reflect on our thoughts and beliefs in the ways I have been describing can find it possible to *accept* both that we do think of the world in those ways and that the world is not that way.

Can we find ourselves in a position to accept both what the metaphysical verdict says about our ways of thinking of the beauty of things and what it says about the way things really are? This is a question about the prospects of metaphysical reflection and the consequences of trying to accept its apparent results. It is about the outcome of a metaphysical assessment of the status of something we take ourselves to believe in, or the kind of illumination or satisfaction that can be expected from it. This is the kind of question I want to draw special attention to.

I think it can easily seem that this question presents no special obstacle in the case of beauty in particular. There would seem to be no difficulty for anyone who thinks that in saying that something is beautiful we simply express or describe a certain kind of feeling or response we have or would have to the thing, or that we attribute to the object a power to produce such responses. To accept such an account of our judgments of beauty would make it possible to accept the negative metaphysical verdict about beauty while continuing to engage in the practice of thinking and speaking of the beauty of things in the ways it says we do. We would have come to see that the presence of beauty as we actually think and speak of it does depend in some way or other on something that is true of beholders.

Even finding that our judgments of beauty cannot be fully explained in any of those ways—as nothing more than expressions of beholders' responses or the disposition of some objects to produce them—would not necessarily present an obstacle to accepting the negative metaphysical verdict. We might find by careful reflection that in judgments of beauty we do in fact typically ascribe to the object some characteristic we think of as different from and not explainable in terms of facts about perceivers' feelings and responses alone. We might find that we regard beauty as something different, and something more, than all such facts

about “beholders.” On this kind of view, the beliefs we accept about the beauty of things would conflict with the metaphysical verdict that says there is no beauty in the world independently of all beholders and their responses. We could not consistently accept the beliefs that this account says we actually hold about the beauty of things and at the same time accept that negative metaphysical verdict about beauty.

This of course is so far only an inconsistency; it does not mean that we could not accept the metaphysical verdict. In fact, accepting a particular metaphysical verdict can even lead us to reject what is in fact a correct understanding of our ways of thinking, or what otherwise would have been the most plausible way of understanding them. We might reject an account of our thought precisely because accepting it is not compatible with accepting what the metaphysical verdict says. This shows why it is important for the answer to our second question—how do we actually think of the beauty of things?—to be arrived at first, independently of our having accepted any metaphysical verdict about the contents of those judgments. Metaphysical conviction can lead in this way to distortion or misunderstanding of what we actually say and believe even in the most familiar everyday judgments we are trying to understand. For metaphysical reflection to illuminate our actual thoughts about the world it must proceed in the opposite direction.

But even if we find that we do in fact think of the beauty of things as something different from everything the negative metaphysical verdict says is part of reality, it would still be possible for us to accept that negative verdict about beauty. What we could not consistently do is accept that verdict while continuing to accept the everyday beliefs we hold about the beauty of things. On the way of understanding those beliefs that we are now considering, the negative metaphysical verdict implies that none of those beliefs, so understood, would be true. What they attribute to objects is something that that metaphysical verdict says is not possessed by any objects in the world.

If we continued to think and speak about the beauty of things as this view says we now do, and if we also accepted the negative metaphysical verdict about beauty, we would have to see ourselves in our judgments of beauty as believing things that the metaphysical theory we accept says are not true. We could not fully, or in full awareness, endorse those judgments. We would be committed to a doctrine that regards them as not true in the way we understand them. Of course, as soon as we moved away from metaphysical reflection and immersed ourselves once again in the world around us, we might easily fall right back into thinking and saying the kinds of things we have always thought about the beauty of things. But in accepting the negative metaphysical verdict we could not

seriously defend that practice or the truth of what we say when engaging in it. Our own best reflection on what we do and on what is so in the world would have exposed all those beliefs as error or illusion on a grand scale. To accept that metaphysical conclusion while continuing to make judgments of beauty would not be a satisfactory position to find oneself in. If we simply cannot help making judgments of beauty, it would be to find that we cannot help believing things that we are convinced simply cannot be true.

It would perhaps be possible to free ourselves from this ironic or whimsical condition and continue to use the *words* 'beauty' and 'beautiful' as we have in the past while now thinking of them as really serving only to draw attention to the feelings we do or would get from certain objects, or perhaps to the powers objects have to produce them. We might utter the same words as before while understanding what we thereby say in ways we can see to be consistent with the negative metaphysical verdict about beauty. We continue to speak of the sun as rising in the east and falling below the western horizon while accepting a theory according to which the sun does not move.

Acceptance of the negative metaphysical verdict about beauty could have even more far-reaching effects. It could change not only our understanding of our practice of speaking and thinking of the beauty of things, but that very practice itself. If we remain convinced that the everyday judgments we have been making of the beauty of things do imply and so commit us to something that the negative metaphysical verdict says is not really part of the independent world, we could resolve not to make such over-committal judgments of beauty any longer. We could try to abandon what we would have seen to be a benighted enterprise. Enlightened persons have often been led to abandon practices and ways of thinking that they have come to see as repositories of error and illusion.

But the conflict might equally lead us to look again at what we took to support the metaphysical verdict in the first place, or what makes us so confident of its correctness. There would be good reason to do this if we think the beauty we ascribe to objects as things are now is not in fact something we regard as equivalent or reducible to anything that the more austere metaphysical view would acknowledge as part of independent reality. In the absence of further argument, why should we be more willing, in the face of a negative metaphysical verdict, to abandon the judgments of beauty we already accept than to abandon a metaphysical verdict that conflicts with those judgments? What is the source of the sense that metaphysics has a stronger claim to correctness or illumination than what we accept as part of the world without any metaphysical help?

If we remain convinced of the negative metaphysical verdict about beauty for whatever reason, abandoning all everyday judgments of beauty that conflict with it will perhaps seem like the most satisfactory metaphysical outcome. By no longer speaking of beauty in those old ways or attributing it to objects around us, we would have brought our thought and practice into line with what our best metaphysical reflection reveals is really true of the world we think about. This would seem to represent genuine philosophical progress—just the kind of illumination and self-understanding that metaphysics appears to promise. By reflection on our actual ways of thinking we would have come to understand more clearly how we actually think of the beauty of things and so how to free ourselves from the errors and confusions about beauty that we now find we have been victims of in the past.

This need not alter or obliterate all the elaborate feelings and responses we have always had toward things we regard as beautiful. Those feelings and responses themselves, and the objects that cause them, would remain part of what the austere metaphysical theory regards as reality, so there would be no need to deny them. Rather than (as we would now see it) falsely ascribing something called beauty to the objects we take an interest in, it looks as if we could just talk more directly about the feelings and responses those objects produce in us and leave it at that. If we still retained some distinctive ways of marking and attending to the special interest and attractiveness that certain kinds of objects have always had for us, we might feel that nothing had really been lost. After all, according to the negative metaphysical verdict about beauty, if we thought and spoke in only these new and corrected ways we would not be missing anything that is actually so in reality.

I think it is still an open question whether such satisfying philosophical illumination can ever really be reached even in the case of beauty. Many believe it has already been achieved in that case. I think we could be confident of such a reassuring outcome only if we had a better understanding than I think we do of how our judgments of beauty actually work and what attitudes we actually hold toward objects we regard as beautiful. That is a daunting question to which I think we still do not have a convincing answer. I introduce the case of beauty here not to pursue it further but only to illustrate the general structure of the kind of metaphysical enquiry I am interested in. It can serve to indicate what is required to achieve a finally satisfactory metaphysical outcome even in a case that many have long regarded as completely uncontroversial.

In the rest of this book I take up three areas of our thought about the world that are more central and so more fundamental than our views

about the beauty of things. I want to see what support can be found there for metaphysical conclusions that would take away or deny something we appear to believe in. In each case I think we face special obstacles in getting even as far toward satisfying metaphysical conclusions as we can seem to get in the case of beauty. There is an elusive but persistent kind of dissatisfaction it is possible to feel in the face of each of these efforts at metaphysical understanding. I want to identify some of the source of that dissatisfaction and try to understand and explain why what we feel we seek must remain unattainable. This might eventually lead us to wonder whether seeking the kind of metaphysical satisfaction I have been trying to identify is the best way to proceed in philosophy. Maybe not being able to reach that metaphysical goal, while understanding why we cannot have what we feel we want, is the most we can hope for. Maybe it could even offer a different kind of philosophical understanding of ourselves.

Whatever support can be found for such metaphysical conclusions in these central areas must be found in the only place it makes sense to look for it first—in the beliefs and other attitudes we actually have about causal dependence, necessity, and values. That is a huge subject—three huge subjects, in fact. There is no question of my doing full justice to any one of them, let alone to all three. But I think considering each of these areas side by side with the others promises greater understanding of the general metaphysical enterprise they are all part of, and perhaps a better estimate of its prospects of success in any one of them.

There are two general reasons for doubt about reaching satisfying metaphysical conclusions in these central areas of our thought. First, there is good reason to think that each of the fundamental concepts in question is irreducible to any set of concepts that does not presuppose it. They cannot be fully explained in different but equivalent terms. If that is so, anyone who understands and recognizes that we have the beliefs about causation, necessity, and values that are to be subjected to metaphysical assessment must therefore possess those very concepts himself and have thoughts and beliefs involving them. Accepting a negative metaphysical verdict that denies that the concepts in question apply to anything in the independent world would directly conflict with accepting any beliefs of those kinds.

If our beliefs about the beauty of things were irreducible to other terms in this way, and we were faced with this kind of conflict, it would seem possible as a last resort simply to abandon our beliefs about the beauty of things. But that does not appear to be a possible option here, with our beliefs in causation, necessity, and values. That is because beliefs or attitudes of those three central kinds have a strong claim to be

regarded not only as irreducible but also as indispensable for any thought at all, or at least for the kind of thinking involved in a metaphysical assessment of their status. That is something to be explored and defended in each case in the chapters that follow. If it is right, the indispensability of those ways of thinking stands in the way of the detachment or disengagement that appears to be needed for genuine metaphysical illumination. It would represent an obstacle to our getting far enough outside our acceptance of the beliefs and attitudes in question to assess their metaphysical credentials with the appropriate neutrality. This is not only a threat to the possibility of metaphysically unmasking these fundamental beliefs as not capturing anything that is so in the independent world. It also casts doubt on the prospects of any appropriately positive reassurance about their independent metaphysical status.

Trying to accept a negative metaphysical verdict about irreducible ways of thinking that we simply cannot abandon leads to dissatisfaction or instability. If the beliefs are indeed indispensable, we will continue to make judgments of those very kinds. In accepting a negative metaphysical verdict about them we would therefore understand ourselves to believe something that the theory we also accept says is not true or does not capture anything that is so in the world. This is not a stable position. The instability does not imply that the metaphysical theory we accept is not or cannot be true. But accepting such a theory about what we believe while continuing to believe what we cannot avoid believing would leave us in a continuously dissatisfying predicament. We could not achieve the kind of understanding of our irreducible and indispensable ways of thinking that this kind of metaphysical reflection seems to promise.

Ways of thinking that are irreducible and indispensable for thinking of any world at all would be shown in this way to enjoy a certain kind of invulnerability against metaphysical exposure. In what follows I explore different varieties or degrees of this indispensability and try to assess the nature and extent of whatever metaphysical invulnerability it can be seen to provide. The question is whether under any proper understanding of these central and fundamental ways of thinking we could consistently achieve the satisfaction that this kind of metaphysical reflection aspires to.