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From Metaphysics to Methodology:
Republic V, 477cd and the Ancient Problem of Rational Opinion

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ABSTRACT. Plato is often read as a philosopher of objectivity and exteriority, as, primarily, a metaphysician, yet philosophers of interiority have relied upon Plato in turning to the subject. What did they find in Plato? A consideration of one issue central to Plato and Platonism, the distinction between opinion and knowledge and the resulting problem of the status and value of our cognition of sensibles, reveals that a *locus classicus* for the metaphysical reading of Plato, *Republic V*, 477cd, contains within it a long-overlooked invitation to turn inward and pursue an interior study of psyche and its ways of thinking, a methodology. A review of early Platonists' attempts to grapple with the problem of our cognition of sensibles reveals the dominance of the metaphysical approach, its common pitfalls, and the need for as well as the potential of a complementary methodological approach. Although the early Platonists tended to deal with psyche metaphysically, at times the exigencies of inquiry do seem to have pushed them to consider it more interiorly. Insights into the principles and results of a methodological approach can be gleaned from their efforts. A consideration of Plato's treatment of psyche and opinion in the dialogues, especially the *Timaeus-Critias*, helps fill out the picture, suggests a possible solution to the problem of our cognition of sensibles, and gives the impression that Plato regards the interior methodological approach, not as a way of supplanting metaphysics, but rather as a way of rendering it more critical and concrete.

KEYWORDS: soul, power, epistemology, interiority, Platonic tradition.

The history of the reception of Plato's works presents an anomaly. On one hand, Plato is read as a philosopher of objectivity and exteriority, as affirming the independent existence of universals, as conceiving knowledge as a confrontation, vision, or contact of a knower with

something fundamentally different. On this reading, Plato is primarily a metaphysician; “Plato’s philosophy is,” as Kozlov asserted, “first of all, *naïve realism*”;¹ the modern, critical turn to the subject seems to be a turn from Plato and the philosophical tradition he helped initiate; and the turn to the subject is a problem to be solved, as Kireevskii and Solov’ev would have it, by re-turning to Plato and recovering — through fideism, intuitionism, mysticism, or some other kind of anti-epistemology — a realistic or idealistic sort of objectivity.² On the other hand, thinkers like Plotinus, Augustine, Schleiermacher, and Kierkegaard appealed to and relied upon Plato in turning to the subject. What did they find in Plato? If we consider just one issue, Plato’s position on our cognition of sensibles, we will find that a *locus classicus* for the metaphysical reading of Plato contains within it a long-overlooked invitation to turn inward and pursue an interior study of the psyche and its ways of thinking — a descriptive and, perhaps, explanatory methodology.

In book five of the *Republic*, Socrates and Glaucon distinguish knowledge and opinion as powers (δυνάμεις). At 477c1–d5, Socrates explains what he means by *powers* and how he distinguishes them:

We say powers are a class of the things that are that enables us — or anything else for that matter — to do whatever we are capable of doing. Sight, for example, and hearing are among the powers...

Of a power, I see neither color nor shape nor any feature of the sort that many other things have, the sort to which I look to distinguish those things from one another for myself. In the case of a power, I look only to what it is set over and what it does, and by reference to these I call each the power it is: What is set over the same things and does the same I call the same power; what is set over something different and does something different I call a different one (trans. by G.M.A. Grube and C.D.C. Reeve, with alterations).³

¹ Quoted in Nethercott 2000: 65.

² *Ibid.* 61–71.

³ Φήσομεν δυνάμεις εἶναι γένος τι τῶν ὄντων, αἷς δὴ καὶ ἡμεῖς δυνάμεθα ἅ δυνάμεθα καὶ ἄλλο πᾶν ὅτι περ ἂν δύνηται, οἷον λέγω ὄψιν καὶ ἀκοὴν τῶν δυνάμεων εἶναι... δυνάμεως γὰρ ἐγὼ οὔτε τινὰ χροῶν ὁρῶ οὔτε σχῆμα οὔτε τι τῶν τοιούτων οἷον καὶ

Socrates and Glaucon agree that knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) is set over being and that it enables one to know what is as it is (478a7). Unless one knows something that is, one does not know (478b5–8). Ignorance, the lack of knowledge, is set over what is not (478c3). Opinion (δόξα) they distinguish as a power intermediate between knowledge and ignorance. It does enable one to think something but is fallible and not as clear as knowledge (477e5–8 and 478c7–d4). They agree they must find that over which opinion is set. They figure it must be intermediate between being and non-being just as opinion is intermediate between knowledge and ignorance. They figure it must be and not be (478d5–e6). They realize becoming is, is not, and is intermediate between being and non-being, and they confirm their distinction: being, the knowable, can be known but not opined; becoming, the opinable, can be opined but not known (478e7–479e8).

The passage is significant. Socrates and Glaucon distinguish knowledge and opinion and being and becoming to define *the philosopher* (474b4–6), to clarify Socrates' notion of philosophic rule (474b6–c3), and to navigate the third wave of Socrates' interlocutors' challenges to his political theory (471c3–473c9). They distinguish knowledge and opinion to show that a philosopher could bring the theoretical *polis* into being.

Further, Plato strikingly presents what has been regarded as his main contribution to the history of philosophy and what quickly became and has remained a key component and defining problem of Platonism, what Sedley has dubbed his “cognitive dualism.”⁴

Socrates and Glaucon acknowledge their distinction's strangeness and consider how difficult it would be to get people to accept it (476d7–e2). But the problem runs deeper. The philosopher knows but primarily

ἄλλων πολλῶν, πρὸς ἃ ἀποβλέπων ἕνια διορίζομαι παρ' ἑμαυτῶ τὰ μὲν ἄλλα εἶναι, τὰ δὲ ἄλλα· δυνάμει δ' εἰς ἐκεῖνο μόνον βλέπω ἐφ' ᾧ τε ἔστι καὶ ὃ ἀπεργάζεται, καὶ ταύτην ἑκάστην αὐτῶν δύναμιν ἐκάλεσα, καὶ τὴν μὲν ἐπὶ τῷ αὐτῷ τεταγμένην καὶ ἕτερον ἀπεργαζομένην ἄλλην. For all translations of Plato, I will rely upon those collected in Cooper & Hutchinson 1997.

⁴Sedley 1996: 91. On cognitive dualism in early Platonism, see Brittain 2011: 544–549.

loves and comes to know being (474c8–475e4). But how can one come to know if ignorance does nothing and opinion only opines becoming? Socrates and Glaucon distinguish knowledge and opinion to show that a philosopher could bring the theoretical *polis* into being, that a lover of knowledge could make the knowable opinable, that a lover of being could make a being become. But how can one apply one's knowledge to becoming if one only knows being? Socrates and Glaucon actually distinguish knowledge and opinion twice in *Republic V*. Initially, they say the knower knows being and becoming as they are in themselves and in relation to each other while the opiner thinks becoming is everything (476c1–d6). Socrates and Glaucon distinguish and relate being, becoming, knowledge, and opinion. But, if one only knows being and only opines becoming, how can one grasp their similarities, differences, and relations? How can one grasp knowledge, ignorance, and opinion and their natures, similarities, differences, and relations to each other and their objects?

Socrates and Glaucon's distinction leads to the *Parmenides*' greatest difficulty (133a8–134e8), the epistemological side of the problems of psyche and demiurgy and what Aristotle deemed a main part of Plato's philosophic legacy, the problem of the meaning of participation.⁵ The distinction threatens to undermine the philosophic project it defines and is meant to further — the possibility of ascent and descent, an explanation of reality, an aesthetics, an ethics, and a politics.

Plato knows that there is a problem. He poses it with the *Corpus*. He treats knowledge and opinion in several divergent ways throughout, ironically juxtaposing them but never explicitly commenting on them or resolving the ambiguities. On one hand, opinion is bad and good, false and true, unintelligent and intelligent, knowledgeable and ignorant, unlikely and likely, opaque and accurate, unstable and stable, potential knowledge and grasp of being and grasp, not of being, but of becoming; mortal and divine; a work of the irrational part of psyche and a work of the rational part.⁶ In *Republic VI*, in the wake

⁵ Arist. *Metaph.* 987b7–13.

⁶ For example, Plato treats opinion as bad and good at *Clit.* 409e4–10 and *Phlb.*

of distinguishing knowledge and opinion, Socrates gives his opinion of the form of the good (506b–507a), describing it as knowable (508e). On the other hand, knowledge is hindered by and requires the senses and grasps both being and becoming and just being.⁷ It is automatically useful⁸ and useless without opinion. The philosopher does not simply know being and becoming upon returning to the cave but must acclimate.⁹ In the *Philebus*, Socrates and Protarchus have a good laugh about the dialectician who knows the circle itself but no circles and conclude that a cognition of sensibles is necessary for the good life “if any one of us ever wants to find his own way home” (trans. by D. Frede).¹⁰ Opinions certainly make Timaeus’ divine cosmos happy (*Ti.* 34b and 37bc.). In *Republic* VI and VII, Socrates distinguishes two types of knowledge, opinion, being, and becoming and suggests four, two of each ascending and descending.¹¹ In the *Timaeus* there is a potential for an infinite series of kinds of opinion and becoming.¹²

36c10–37c3; false and true, *Grg.* 454d5–8, *R.* V, 477e5–478a2, *Tht.* 170a6–171c7, and *Phlb.* 36c10–37c3 (see also *Arist. De an.* 404b); unintelligent and ignorant and intelligent and knowledgeable, *Cri.* 46b ff.; unlikely and likely, *Ti.* 29cd; opaque and accurate, *R.* V, 478c and VI, 509d–510a and *Ti.* 56b; unstable and stable, *R.* VI, 505e, *Ti.* 29b, and 37b; potential knowledge and grasp of being, *Men.* 85b8–86c3, 97a6–98b6, *R.* V, 476c1–d6, VI, 506c6–9, VII, 515b4–c3, 520c15, X, 601c7–602a10, *Smp.* 201e10–202a10, and 420b6–c9; grasp, not of being, but only of becoming, *Phd.* 84a8–9, *R.* V, 476e4–479e8, VI, 508d3–8, 510a–511d5, VII, 532a1–534d1, *Phlb.* 57e6–59d6, 61d7–62d6, 66a4–c6; mortal and divine, *Phdr.* 246a ff., *Ti.* 27d–29d, 34b, and 37bc; a work of the irrational part of psyche, *R.* X, 602c ff.; and a work of the rational part of psyche, *Ti.* 37bc

⁷ For example, Plato treats knowledge as hindered by sense at *Phd.* 84a8–9; helped by sense, *Phd.* 73c–75b and *R.* VII, 522e ff.; grasping both being and becoming, V, 476cd; and grasping just being, V, 476e ff.

⁸ E.g., *Men.* 97a6–98b6, *Phdr.* 246a ff., and *R.* V, 476c1–d6.

⁹ *R.* VII, 516e–517a, 517d–518b, and 520c.

¹⁰ *Phlb.* 62ab: εἰ μέλλει τις ἡμῶν καὶ τὴν ὁδὸν ἐκάστοτε ἐξευρήσειν οἴκαδε.

¹¹ The account of the philosopher’s return to the cave implies that the four segments of the divided line may represent eight different kinds of cognition and objects insofar as each of the four may be approached from “below” or “above” (*R.* VI, 509d–VII, 520d).

¹² At *Ti.* 27d–29d, Timaeus distinguishes good and bad craftsmen, paradigms, and works. He explains that the beautiful works of good craftsmen who use good (intelligible) paradigms are the objects of potentially likely opinionative accounts. He implies

Plato seems to know what he is doing. He does not abandon his philosophic project. He does not renounce his cognitive dualism. He repeatedly, deliberately, and provocatively poses the resulting problem and, often, in depictions and accounts, seems to rely upon and indirectly exhibit a solution.

The Academics and Platonists had a bit to say on the matter. Speusippus introduced the notion of an “epistemic sense-perception” (ἐπιστημονική αἴσθησις), which is like τέχνη, a “craft” or “skill,” and seems to involve a study and understanding of formal principles, deliberate training, muscle memory, and possibly the epistemic information of one’s perception of opinables — an example being a musician’s control of her instrument.¹³ Xenocrates defined opinion as a combination of sense and knowledge, saying it grasps superlunary phenomena while sense alone grasps sublunary phenomena and knowledge grasps intelligibles.¹⁴ Commenting on the *Timaeus*, Crantor explained that psyche is a compound of the intelligible and opinable and that its task is to judge (κρίνειν) both intelligibles and sensibles and to grasp all their differences, similarities, and relations. It is composed of all things so it can cognize all things.¹⁵ Antiochus reiterated Socrates and Glaucon’s distinction between knowledge and opinion in a Stoic mode: intellect (νοῦς) applies itself to sensibles and empirically develops its concepts.¹⁶ According to Alcinous, “understanding not without the epistemic *logos*” (νόησις οὐκ ἄνευ τοῦ ἐπιστημονικοῦ λόγου) judges primary intelligibles, transcendent ideas; “the epistemic *logos* not without understanding” (ὁ ἐπιστημονικός λόγος οὐκ ἄνευ νοήσεως) judges secondary intelligibles, immanent ideas; “sense-perception not without

that the ugly works of bad craftsmen who use bad (sensible) paradigms are the objects of less potentially likely opinionative accounts. It seems a worse craftsman could use the ugly works of bad craftsmen to make uglier works grasped by worse accounts and so on *ad infinitum*.

¹³ S.E. *Adv. log.* 1.145–146 = *Adv. math.* 7.145–146 (fr. 75 Tarán). Trans. by R.G. Bury. See also Dillon 2003: 78–79.

¹⁴ *Adv. math.* 7.147 ff. (fr. 5 Heinze = fr. 83 Isnardi Parente). See also Dillon 2003: 123–125 and Dillon 1996: 35–37.

¹⁵ Plu. *Moralia* 1012d and f; Dillon 2003: 221–222 and 1996: 42.

¹⁶ Dillon 1996: 91–96.

the doxastic *logos*” (αἰσθησις οὐκ ἄνευ τοῦ δοξαστικοῦ λόγου) judges primary and secondary sensibles, proper sensibles and sensible qualities, and “the doxastic *logos* not without sense-perception” (ὁ δοξαστικός λόγος οὐκ ἄνευ τῆς αἰσθήσεως) judges composite bodies.¹⁷ Plotinus held that sense-perception receives imprints (τύποι), from sensibles and passes them along to discursive reasoning (διάνοια), which compares them to imprints of ideas grasped by and contained within intellect. If the faculty of discursive reasoning asks a question like, “What is this?” it responds to itself with a judgment that the sensible does or does not participate in a certain form.¹⁸ Proclus distinguished a rational opinion that receives the *logoi* of sensibles from intellect and the faculty of discursive reasoning, contains these *logoi* within itself, and recollects them upon the reception of primary sensibles, enabling one to recognize the accidentally sensible, intelligible unities of which the primary sensibles are an appearance — the apple that unites a manifold of reds, browns, yellows, and greens.¹⁹

In general, these philosophers take a similar approach. They proceed metaphysically, in terms of parts or powers and objects. Parts and powers combine, interact, grasp, contain, exchange, compare, question, judge, recollect. Exactly how they combine and interact is not always clear, and exactly what the knower does when she opines knowledgeable remains obscure.²⁰ The focus is the knower’s *ability* to opine knowledgeable, not her knowledgeable *opining*.

Additionally, the multiplication of powers and parts, their combination, and the notion of their interaction exacerbates the problem. Besides having to account for the similarities, differences, and relations of knowledge, opinion, and their objects, one must account for the simi-

¹⁷ Summerell & Zimmer 2007 4.154: 25–29, 156: 1–6 and 8–11; Sorabji 2005: 34–35; Dillon 1996: 274–275; and Brittain 2011: 544–546.

¹⁸ Plot. I 1[53].9: 18–20 and V 3[49].3: 1–9. Trans. by A.H. Armstrong. See also Sorabji 2005: 37–39.

¹⁹ Procl. *In Ti.* 249: 13–27, 248: 25–9, 292: 27 – 293: 5. Trans. by D.T. Runia and M. Share; Sorabji 2005: 35–36; and Martijn 2010: 143–152.

²⁰ Dillon’s critical examination of Alcinous’ account neatly exemplifies the sorts of questions left by the metaphysical approach (1996: 275–6).

larities, differences, and relations of intellect, the faculty of discursive reasoning, opinion, and their objects; understanding, the epistemic *logos*, sense-perception, the doxastic *logos*, and their objects; and so on. What is more, in accounting for rational opinion in terms of parts, powers, and objects, one presupposes, not only that rational opinion exists, but also that one has achieved it, not merely in general, but with respect to all the particulars of one's account of becoming; its relations to being; and the powers set over them.

Generally, Plato's successors followed the method for distinguishing powers Socrates lays out in *Republic V*. But, in that passage, Socrates and Glaucon do not actually follow Socrates' stated method to distinguish opinion. He says that he distinguishes powers through reference to that over which a power is set and what the power does. But he and Glaucon distinguish opinion from knowledge and ignorance as fallible, clearer than ignorance, and darker than knowledge and then search for that over which opinion is set through reference to opinion's features as a power.²¹

The method Socrates lays out is not the only way to distinguish knowledge and opinion. In fact, the method Socrates lays out seems geared specifically to people unused to dealing with the non-sensible. Recall the talk of seeing and looking, colors and shapes, Socrates' use of sight and hearing as examples of powers, and his characteristically self-deprecating and ironic claim that he needs things like color and shape to draw distinctions. His method would seem to cater to unenlightened, unconverted opiners: identify the kind of sensible object — the visible, the audible, etc. — and infer from that the non-sensible activity that apprehends it and from that, in turn, the non-sensible power that enables one to apprehend it. It is important to note that Glaucon is playing the role of an angry, everyday opiner in the passage (476e). Note, however, that, of the powers in question, only opinion's objects are sensible; knowledge, ignorance, their non-sensible objects, and the non-sensible qualities of infallibility, fallibility, and cognitive clarity

²¹ Contrast Aristotle's approach (and results) in *De anima*. At 2.4, 41a14–22, Aristotle restates Socrates' stated method of *R. V*, 477cd, and he adheres to it more strictly.

and opacity are identified quite readily; and opinion's sensible objects are identified last.

Socrates says powers also can be distinguished through reference to what they do. Psyche, as Plato presents it, is present to itself in the performance of some of these activities or motions.²² They are not sensible but are an intimately familiar ongoing experience. Indeed, one could even dispense with the appeal to powers altogether and pursue an account of the motions in which psyche is present to itself purely in terms of those motions — an account of psyche's interior ways of functioning.

No account of psyche would be complete without an account of parts and powers. A metaphysics and a reflective account of psyche's methods would complement each other. To the metaphysical account of psyche's being and becoming, an interior account of its ways of moving would add an account of what psyche is doing when it is opining and knowing. It should render a metaphysics more concrete, critical, and instructive.

Plato reverses the order of Socrates' stated method. In the *Timaeus* and elsewhere, he has characters affirm psyche's ability and responsibility to reflect on its motion.²³ And he reliably, often ironically alludes to the psychic motions indicated by and reflected in the dialogues' drama.²⁴ Plato does not just allow for an interior, methodological ap-

²² Psyche's partial but crucial self-presence seems as fundamental for Plato as the Socratic command that presupposes it, that one ought to care for and study one's psyche. *Timaeus*' account of plant life at 77b5–c5 makes the point by contrast. It also clarifies Plato's notion of psychic self-motion and what concretely would be involved in obeying the Socratic command and *Timaeus*' rendition at 90cd, that one ought to study the motions of the heavens and order one's own psychic motions accordingly: "This type [i.e., plant psyche] is totally devoid of opinion, reasoning or understanding... For throughout its existence it is completely passive, and its formation has not entrusted it with a natural ability to discern and reflect upon any of its own characteristics, by revolving within and about itself, repelling movement from without and exercising its own inherent movement. Hence it is alive, to be sure, and unmistakably a living thing, but it stays put, standing fixed and rooted, since it lacks self-motion" (trans. by Donald J. Zeyl).

²³ See previous note.

²⁴ The Platonic account of thinking as a silent dialogue in the psyche (*Th.* 189e–

proach. He invites and virtually requires it. In the spirit of Crantor, Mohr has argued that a main point of the *Timaeus* is that we are able to form stable, true opinions about the world and that we are able to do so because the demiurge made us and the world in such a way that we can.²⁵ Timaeus would agree, but Plato has the possibly fictional Timaeus²⁶ reach that conclusion on the basis of a distinction between knowledge, opinion, being, and becoming that he draws “according to [his] opinion”²⁷ and according to which the account of the demiurge, psyche, and world is at best an opinionative and therefore likely *mythos* or *logos* (29b–d). One can address the problem head-on by accounting for the opining and knowing in terms of opining and knowing instead of in terms of the opined and known.

Plato’s successors followed Socrates’ stated method for discerning powers for the most part. Occasionally, some wandered. Crantor affirmed that, in opining and knowing, psyche judges as a unity. Alcinous relied on *logos*. And Plotinus appealed to *διάνοια*, which asks a question and answers with a judgment. In these cases, Crantor, Alcinous, and Plotinus seem to have strayed into reflective methodology. In any case, they seem to have hit on elements that would be central to an account of interior psychic motion: the unity of psyche, *logos*, discursive reasoning, question and answer, and judgment.

The *Timaeus-Critias* provides a fuller sense of what an account of psyche’s interior motion would be like and could do. Plato draws a series of analogies in the *Timaeus-Critias*. The drama, myths, speeches, and their objects seem to exhibit the same structure. In a fraught political context, Timaeus, Hermocrates, Critias, and a fourth had asked Socrates to give an account of the ideal *polis* (20b).²⁸ Socrates asked them to give an account of it displaying its excellence in a proper struggle and competition (19b and 20b). Critias proposes bringing the myth

190a, *Sph.* 263e–264a, and *Ti.* 37bc) suggests the dialogues might be replete with depictions of psychic motion or, perhaps more accurately, be one whole depiction.

²⁵ Mohr 2005: xxi, 13–20, and 36–40.

²⁶ Nails 2002: 293.

²⁷ *Ti.* 27d5: κατ’ ἐμῆν δόξαν.

²⁸ Johansen 2004: 184.

to reality by establishing the similarities between the ideal city and ancient Athens (26cd). Socrates agrees and prepares to judge their performances (26e–27a and cf. 29cd). Socrates notices that a fourth interlocutor is missing and asks Timaeus where he is. Timaeus appeals to the principles of Socratic intellectualism, and concludes that the fourth is sick (17a). Socrates recalls the ideal city (17c–19b). At each stage of the account, he asks Timaeus if his recollection is correct. Timaeus answers again and again in the affirmative. In his proem Timaeus adverts to the experience of sense-perception, applies definitions of being, becoming, knowledge, and opinion, and concludes that the world came to be (27d–29b). The Demiurge looks to the chaos and traces of forms, looks to the forms, and then uses forms and numbers to bring the chaos and traces into shape (28c–29b, 30a, 30c–31a, and 53b). When psyche's circle of the same contacts being and moves in its natural orderly fashion, it makes an announcement and knowledge comes to be. When psyche's circle of the different contacts becoming and moves in its natural orderly fashion, under the sway of the circle of the same, it makes a declaration and stable true opinions and beliefs come to be (37bc). The cosmos is the product of the union of Necessity and Reason (48a).

Αἰσθήσις, νόησις, κρίσις — this structure runs throughout the *Timaeus-Critias*. It is similar to the structure of psychic motion Socrates sketches at *Philebus* 38a ff., but — unlike that dianoetic sequence of questions and answers, sensing, remembering, judging, and imagining — the sequence in the *Timaeus-Critias* involves νόησις, a grasp of being, despite being about becoming. This complicates the distinction between knowledge and opinion and the notion of powers. To be able to opine in this manner, one must be adequately sensitive, inquisitive, intelligent, critical, and reasonable. But, if one can find a structure of rational opining that involves νόησις and yet still concerns becoming, one may be able to discern a structure of knowing that is distinct from rational opining but still shares motions with it. A methodological account of psyche may complicate the account of powers, but it does not complicate it abstractly. It renders it concrete, familiar, recognizable. It could provide a basis for understanding the relations between and

complementarity of opining and knowing, sorting out the ambiguities in Plato's epistemology, and gaining concrete insights into psychology, metaphysics, physics, aesthetics, ethics, politics, and every other product of psyche's interior motion. Finally, if one uncovered an immanent normative principle – psyche's natural way of moving (*Ti.* 44b), for instance – one would have an interior dynamic criterion for determining what is true and good, for orienting oneself and finding one's way home. Plato invites us to turn inward, to do epistemology in a critical, interior fashion, but he does not seem to find this to be at odds with metaphysics. Rather, he seems to invite us to an interiority that can ground and clarify metaphysics.

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