

Mapping the Field of Governmentality: Ontology and Methodology in Social Theory

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ABSTRACT – Questions of methodology have often appeared to supersede questions of ontology within the field of social inquiry. Indeed, an antagonism towards any form of ‘metaphysics’ has tended to lead social theorists towards what are viewed as more methodological than ontological conceptions. But methodology and ontology are really no more than dual reflections of the same structure. And any critique of metaphysics can only be undertaken from some ontological-methodological standpoint. Both Foucault and Heidegger can be viewed as elaborating a certain ‘anti-metaphysical’ position that is nevertheless grounded in the elaboration of an ontological-methodological stance. The approach that is entailed by a certain ‘governmental’ approach to social scientific studies can also be viewed as having a similarly anti-metaphysical, and yet constructively ontological-methodological, character. As well as providing an account of the nature of such a ‘governmental’ approach, this paper will explore a number of issues that arise in connection with that approach including the contrast between ‘descriptive’ and ‘causal-explanatory’ approaches in social theory, historicization as a research technique, and the possibility of a progressive or ameliorative politics.

Questions of methodology – questions concerning how inquiry into a particular region should proceed – are rarely separable from questions of ontology – from questions concerning the entities and structures that are constitutive of that region. There are, of course, certain general methodological commitments – considerations of evidential adequacy, consistency, simplicity and so forth – that obtain, to some extent, irrespective of ontology, but, at a more particular level, methodological recommendations typically reflect ontological preferences. Thus, what count as the proper methods for identifying certain phenomena within a region as requiring explanation or description, what sorts of entities are admitted as relevant to the explanation or description of those phenomena, and what counts as an adequate explanation or description, all depend to a greater or lesser extent on what are taken to be the basic entities and structures that make up the region in question.

Methodological commitments thus always bring ontological commitments in their train – one cannot avoid ontological entanglement by proclaiming one’s interests as ‘purely’ methodological. And this is not just in the sense that certain ontological commitments are built in to our very language, but in the more particular sense that methodological commitments typically derive from and express certain theoretical preferences in relation to explanation and description. In this respect, to engage in any form of explanatory or descriptive enterprise is already to be involved in ontology. While there may be forms of description or explanation that are neutral as between some limited set of alternative ontologies, there are no forms of description or explanation that are neutral with respect to all ontologies – every description or explanation brings some ontological commitment with it. Social scientific theorists, and others, who claim not to be involved in advancing any ontological theses, but to be involved merely in a descriptive enterprise or else as concerned only with establishing certain methodological principles, can be seen to have misunderstood the nature of their own activity. In this respect, the dichotomy between descriptive and explanatory modes of analysis that is sometimes invoked, and that is an important feature of some forms of Foucaultian analysis, can (though not always) be misleading. While there is a certain point to this dichotomy, as I note below, descriptive modes of analysis are typically embedded, if only implicitly, in modes of causal analysis (to describe is already, one might say, to embed the thing described in a certain causal-explanatory framework). The interconnection of description and explanation can, indeed, be seen

as analogous with the interconnection of methodology and ontology (for this reason I will often refer both to methodology and ontology, and to explanation and description, in combination).

Social theory is invariably ontologically committed – as is any form of inquiry no matter what the domain. Social theorists have often, however, been suspicious of ‘ontology’ and this suspicion is typically derivative of a more deep-seated and pervasive antagonism towards metaphysics. Such antagonism is not merely a function of the post-modern rejection of so-called ‘grand narratives’, but is a characteristic and pervasive feature of social scientific inquiry as it has developed over the last two hundred years or so – it is, indeed, a suspicion rooted, paradoxical though that may sometimes seem, in the origins of social scientific inquiry in the Enlightenment. Part of this suspicion has undoubtedly arisen out of an association of metaphysical with religious modes of thinking, together with a view of both the religious and the metaphysical as less than properly scientific and as insufficiently attentive either to the realities of life or the demands of concrete empirical analysis. Jonathan H. Turner, for example, begins his history of sociological theory by reporting Auguste Comte’s division of the intellectual world into three stages – ‘the law of the three stages’ – which he explains thus:

In the religious stage, interpretations of events are initially provided by religious beliefs or by reference to the activities of scared and supernatural forces. Out of religion comes a metaphysical stage in which logic, mathematics, and other formal systems of reason come to dominate how events are interpreted. And out of these gains in formal reasoning in the metaphysical stage emerges the possibility for ‘positivism’ or a scientific stage., where formal statements are critically examined against carefully collected facts (Turner, 1991: 1-2).

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Something of this Comtean spirit, which places a certain ‘positive’ empiricism, directed towards the careful analysis of the particular and the concrete, above either religious or metaphysical systems of thought, remains an important and characteristic feature of much contemporary research, especially in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and cultural studies. Something of this same spirit is also reflected in the writings of another of the ‘founding fathers’ of sociology, Karl Marx. In The German Ideology Marx tells us that:

Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these...no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their material world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking... Where speculation ends, where real life starts, there consequently begins real, positive science, the expounding of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of men (Marx, 1986: 27-28).

The ‘suspicion’ of metaphysics that can be found in Marx is closely tied to a conception of metaphysics that associates it with religion and that treats both as separated from the concrete empirical reality that is the primary concern of science. It is a suspicion that can also be seen in Marx’s famous pronouncement that ‘The philosophers have only given different interpretations of the world, what comes now is to change it’ (Marx, 1971: 4). To some extent more recent expressions of a similar suspicion of metaphysics, or, more precisely, of metaphysics understood as ‘idealism’, and arising from within Marxist and ‘post-Marxist’ perspectives,ⁱⁱ stand within much the same framework: metaphysics, like religion, is representative of a view on the world, rather than a view from the world; it attempts to impose meaning onto the world from outside, rather than understand meaning as generated from the concrete materiality within.

One of the oddities of social-theoretic suspicion of metaphysics, however, is that it has often failed to recognise the way in which it does itself stem from a particular metaphysical perspective. Both the Comtean

prioritisation of 'positive' science and the Marxist emphasis on the material and the empirical over the ideal and the rational exemplify thoroughly metaphysical positions in that they take a certain 'ontology' – typically a certain 'scientific' or materialist ontology – as fundamental to all forms of inquiry. And even when the Marxist and Comtean narratives are explicitly abandoned, the general metaphysical standpoints on which they are based often remain. Of the various forms of post-modernist social theory, most remain essentially committed – in spite of the fact that they often employ a rhetoric that is typically anti-metaphysical – to a certain empiricist materialism. Post-modernism, in this sense, remains within a thoroughly modernist frame.

Moreover, the original emphasis on an empiricist and materialist metaphysics within social theory was also paralleled, in particularly clear forms in Comte and Marx, by a view of social theory as essentially directed towards the achievement of certain socially beneficial outcomes. The tendency for social theory to see itself as associated both with a 'realistic' and practically oriented empiricism and with an ameliorative and progressive politics has survived even the challenge of post-modernist thinking. Indeed, as it is manifest within social theory, post-modern thought can be viewed as simply the latest manifestation of the long-standing social-theoretic suspicion of metaphysics that not only takes metaphysics to be identical with an essentially religious, and so an anti-empiricist, mode of thought, but that also rejects metaphysics in favour of a more 'practically' (and politically) oriented form of concrete social analysis and critique.

Of course, this social scientific suspicion or antagonism towards metaphysics need not always entail a suspicion of ontology in general. Although, philosophers have often viewed 'ontology' and 'metaphysics' as almost co-extensive terms – both being understood as constituted by the inquiry into, or the theory of, 'what is' – metaphysics can also be viewed as designating that particular form of ontology that looks to provide an account of 'what is' in the most basic and all-encompassing sense. In this respect, while any and every inquiry or theory brings a certain ontology with it – that is, any and every inquiry or theory presupposes a certain structure or set of entities that are constitutive of the particular region inquired into or theorised about – metaphysics is the attempt to inquire into that which underlies and also unifies any and every such region; it is the attempt to formulate an ontology that precedes all other ontologies and that provides an account of the unique structure or set of entities that are presupposed by all forms of inquiry or theorisation. In this sense, social scientific suspicion of metaphysics can be seen as consisting in a suspicion of the attempt to ground everything that is – the reality of both the natural and the social or cultural world – in some single, underlying entity or structure. What is often in question is whether the anti-metaphysical spirit evident within social theory does itself escape this same metaphysical tendency – whether it does not in fact merely substitute one form of metaphysics for another.

A suspicion of metaphysics, in the particular sense of the term just outlined, is not, however, only to be found in social theory. An anti-metaphysical tendency is also to be found within philosophy, and not merely as a recently emerged phenomenon, since it can be traced back at least as far as the scepticism of Sextus Empiricus and of his predecessor Pyrrho. David Hume and Immanuel Kant are perhaps the two most notable representatives of the anti-metaphysical tendency within philosophy as it developed after Descartes and prior to the twentieth century. More recently, the philosophical suspicion of metaphysics has arisen in at least two main forms: the first springing from empiricist and scientific modes of thought (often inspired as much by John Locke and Isaac Newton, as by Hume) that are exemplified, in philosophy, in the work of such as Rudolf Carnap and W. V. Quine; the second deriving from the critical tradition inaugurated by Kant (a tradition that also takes on a historical turn in the nineteenth century), and that develops in a particular form in the work of Heidegger. A

number of contemporary philosophers set out anti-metaphysical positions that draw on elements from both these streams – a notable example here being Richard Rorty whose ‘post-modernist’ stance combines elements from both Quine and Heidegger amongst others, another, earlier such figure, is perhaps Nietzsche.

Clearly there is a good deal of overlap between the anti-metaphysical positions that have developed within philosophy and those that are present within social theory. But there are also some important differences that obtain between those positions – particularly, in my view, between the sort of anti-metaphysical stance to be found in Heidegger and that to be found in Quine, Carnap or in much social theory. At times, particularly in his earlier work – prior to about 1933 – Heidegger’s own project is clearly, in important senses, a metaphysical one, albeit a metaphysical project that also attempts a rethinking and refounding of metaphysics at the same time as it engages in a critique of the previous metaphysical tradition. In this respect Heidegger’s project bears comparison with Kant’s in the Critique of Pure Reason – both attempt to rescue a certain sort of metaphysics, and certainly the possibility of ontological inquiry, from dogmatic metaphysics and scepticism (In his Kantbuch of 1929 Heidegger presents the Kantian project as a ‘laying of the ground’ or the ‘foundations’ of metaphysics – see Heidegger, 1991). In his later work, while Heidegger can still be viewed as engaged in a form of ‘ontology’ (though we have to be careful how we use the term), ‘metaphysics’ designates a way of thinking about the world to which we are inevitably prone that continually tries to reduce the world and ‘what is’ to some underlying rational principle or ground that is properly only a part or aspect of the world – to understand being, as Heidegger puts it, always and only in terms of some particular being among beings. From this Heideggerian perspective, the anti-metaphysics that is associated with empiricist and scientific thinking, as well as with much social scientific theorising, remains metaphysical in spite of itself – such thinking, while rejecting certain forms of metaphysics, nevertheless prioritises a certain particular way of understanding the world over all others, and insists on understanding the world in terms only of some particular aspect of the world.

One of the important features of the Heideggerian attack on metaphysics is that it seems to itself be given a particularly social scientific turn in the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault has himself acknowledged the central influence of Heidegger, along with Nietzsche, on his own thinking. And although Foucault is not explicit about the exact nature of this influence, one respect in which Heideggerian thinking seems clearly apparent in Foucault is in Foucault’s similar rejection of the ‘metaphysical’. Here the reference to ‘metaphysics’ has to be understood in the Heideggerian sense of a reference to a mode of understanding that privileges a particular feature or aspect of the world over all others – that attempts to explain all entities or structures in terms of a single entity or structure. This is how, I suggest, we should understand, for instance, Foucault’s critique of the idea of ‘man’ in Les mots et les chose (Foucault, 1974: 314ff). Indeed, Foucault’s anti-humanistic position in this work, in particular, can usefully be compared with Heidegger’s own critique of humanism in the influential ‘Brief über Humanismus’ – such anti-humanism (though it is not an opposition to or neglect of the human) is a reiterated feature of the work of both thinkers throughout their respective intellectual careers.

Yet the comparison, and the line of influence, between Heidegger and Foucault does not end with the critique of metaphysics alone – notwithstanding their anti-metaphysical positions, both Heidegger and Foucault can be viewed as offering a certain model of ontological analysis that stands as a counter to the analysis proposed by the traditional metaphysician or social theorist. The style and nature of this analysis is perhaps sometimes clearer in Heidegger than in Foucault – indeed, Foucault provides us less with an analysis as with a series of suggestions and exemplars indicating how such an analysis might proceed – but it is an analysis that can, nevertheless, be given a reasonably clear exposition and that also connects up with a number of other

themes in contemporary social theory as well as philosophy. The analysis that I have in mind here is one that I have already tried to spell out, in my own terms, in work I have undertaken with Gary Wickham that centres on the notion of governance. (see Malpas and Wickham, 1995 & 1997). It is a mode of analysis that is developed, in Foucault's work, through a number of different forms, by means of the work on power and discipline, for instance, as well as through the late work on governmentality and self-governance. In Heidegger, while matters are perhaps rather more complex to summarise than in Foucault, the approach at issue can be seen to be evident in a number of different ways – in the idea of the structure of Dasein as constituted through a number of equi-primordial elements that are worked out in terms of Dasein's concrete 'being-in-the-world' and, in later Heidegger, through the idea of disclosure as something that always takes place within a complex structure of interlocking elements that 'clear' a space – a world – within which things can appear. The features of this approach that interest me here are not, of course, only to be found in Foucault and Heidegger, but can also be discerned, to a greater or lesser extent, in the work of a number of other contemporary theorists. Indeed, in my own work, I treat Weber as another figure who can be seen as making an important contribution to the ideas at issue here as they develop within a social scientific context in particular. For my present purposes, however, it is on Foucault and Heidegger that I want to concentrate attention.

In its general outline the analysis at issue here – the analysis that that Gary Wickham and I have developed in one form in our work on governance – combines two fundamental ontological, but also, of course, methodological, ideas. And, to pre-empt one possible misunderstanding here, these ideas are not metaphysical ideas in the traditional sense, since, although they propose a mode of analysis that is intended to apply to almost all and every domain, the analysis does not propose any single entity or substantive principle as that on the basis of which any domain is founded. In this respect, if the approach is viewed in any way as 'metaphysical', then it is a sort of 'empty' metaphysics – a metaphysics, if it is that, that can be seen as advancing a rethinking of the metaphysical demand for explanation or reason itself. This is evident, I think, in Foucault, in the turn towards description rather than explanation. The idea that a strict dichotomy between these two can actually be sustained is, as I noted earlier, problematic, but if we take this emphasis on description as having a fundamentally rhetorical point, then we can understand Foucault's concern with description over explanation as a matter of directing our attention away from the typically metaphysical attempt to discover some deeper rationale for things that is to be found in some ultimate level of causes or explanatory principles (Foucault's emphasis on description can be seen to have some affinities with a similar emphasis in Wittgenstein in whose work there is a strong anti-metaphysical tendency also). In Heidegger, the possibility of a rethinking of the metaphysical is evident in his attempts to rethink the very concept of 'ground', 'reason' or 'Grund' [on this latter point see especially Heidegger, 19XX]). This emphasis on rethinking fundamental concepts and modes of procedure may lead one to view the approach at issue here is really more methodological than ontological, but on this point I would reiterate my earlier emphasis on ontology and methodology as always bound together. The approach advanced here, and that I suggest can be found in Heidegger and Foucault, is both ontological as well as methodological – it may or may not be construed as 'metaphysical' depending on exactly how the metaphysical is understood.

Let me set out the two ideas that I think are central here. The first idea involves a focus on a certain structural mode of analysis. Immediately, I have to say that this should not be taken to imply that the analysis is therefore to be categorised as a variety of structuralism: there is no particular level of structure that can be deemed to be primary on this account, while the focus on structure itself has to be understood as allied with other concepts, the appeal to structure thus lacks the specificity of 'structuralist' approaches. In Heidegger's Being

and Time, the emphasis on structure is evident in two ways: in the commitment to a structural analysis of Dasein as 'being-in-the-world' that takes Dasein to be a unitary phenomenon that is nevertheless constituted only through the integration of a complex set of differentiated elements or aspects; and in the commitment to the 'equiprimordially' of these different elements or aspects such that those elements or aspects have to be seen as together originating in the unitary structure of Dasein even though that structure is itself only constituted by means of those elements. The second idea that is at issue here involves a focus on a certain 'dynamic' mode of analysis that brings with it a certain reciprocity of effect. In Foucault this is most clearly evident in the turn towards the notion of power, and with it resistance, as a central focus for inquiry. It is not just the focus on power alone that is important here – power is itself only understood in relation to the resistance which is generated along with it. If we think in terms of a structure here, then the sort of structural model we should have in mind is perhaps less the structure of a static system of inter-defined elements, as the dynamic functional system that is exemplified in an engine in which every stroke has its counter-stroke, in which power produces resistance, in which resistance produces power. In Heidegger, this dynamic mode of analysis arises, not through any direct focus on power as such, but rather through giving central stage to concepts of projective activity. Dasein's projecting of itself into the world through its concrete involvement with things both determines the ordering of things in the world and the ordering of Dasein. Moreover, such projecting is generative of both possibility and constraint. In this respect, the emphasis on the structure, and the elements within it, as defined, but also constrained, through reciprocating activity, can be seen to bring with it an emphasis on the necessarily limited and partial character of every form of activity or exercise of power – what is acted upon is both constituted by activity, and yet always extends beyond any particular instance of such activity, while every exercise of power, while seeking to exercise control over that which is subject to it, is itself constrained and limited by just that which it attempts to control. With partiality and limitation is also conjoined a thesis concerning multiplicity – the necessarily limited character of projective activity, of the exercise of power, of governmental practice brings with it a commitment to the multiplicity of such projects, the multiple forms of power and the multiple practices of governance (see Malpas and Wickham, 1995 & 1997).

If we think of both power/resistance and the reflexive projection of Dasein as productive of both ordering and of constraint, then we can see how both might be assimilated to an account that takes a general notion of governance as the overarching concept. The idea of governance can be seen as neatly combining both a certain structural mode of analysis together with an emphasis on activity as both productive and constraining. Governance, on this sort of account, is not to be understood as some activity in which pre-existing entities are brought under control by the directing influence of an agent (whether individual or collective), but rather as a dynamic structure in which agents define themselves through their attempts to exercise control over objects that, while constituted in terms of the activities of governance to which they are subject, nevertheless always extend beyond the confines of any particular governing activity. Moreover, there can be no single level of analysis that completely captures the governmental structure at issue – both objects and agents stand at the intersection of multiple governing practices, and no single agent nor any single object is completely encompassed by any single such practice. An analysis that is geared towards the notion of governance as deployed here, is thus an analysis that is always incomplete, that always looks towards governance as operating on various levels and in multiple forms. In the account that Gary Wickham and I have developed, the necessary binding together of productivity with constraint, of power with resistance, of active generation with a generating of limit, is expressed through the idea of the inevitable failure of all governing practices. Such failure is, on our account, a mark of the dynamic

and reciprocal character of the structure of governance as such and can be seen to be operative at every level of analysis, description or explanation. Indeed, such a tendency towards partiality, towards limitation, towards 'failure', can be seen as characteristic of the theoretical activity of the social scientist or philosopher as much as of the 'practical' activity of the citizen, the householder, the business person, the politician, the corporation or the state.

Now it might be supposed that in looking to the sort of account that I have been outlining here – the sort of account that I have been presenting as a feature of both Heidegger and Foucault, as well as of the work of Gary Wickham and myself – what is really being advanced is an account that looks only to some very general level of collective structure as the basic level for explanation or description. Thus I recently read a brief characterisation of Foucault according to which a Foucaultian account of the game of football (recent events in France were undoubtedly at work) would view the game as consisting of a set of rules but no players. While there is something partly right about this, it can easily lead to a mistaken view of the ontology that is really being proposed. On the reading of Foucault and Heidegger that I am presenting, and on the account of governance that I have set out, it is not that the real level of analysis is to be identified with the level of structural inter-relation between elements, but rather that elements cannot be removed from the dynamic, relational structures in which they are embedded without loss of both the structural whole itself and the elements that make it up. The reciprocity – the mutual constitution – that obtains between elements within the structure is reflected in a mutual reciprocity between the elements and the overall structure. The structure is itself constituted through the interplay of the elements within it, even as those elements are constituted through their inter-relation within the whole structure. It is not that the 'rules' are simply what constitute the game, since the rules themselves depend upon the elements – players, officials, field, ball – to which those rules make reference even as those elements are given definition through the rules. Rather than look to some reified notion of 'structure', we have to think of both structure and elements as forming part of a single field – a field, moreover, that is capable of multiple forms of analysis depending on our own projection of that field, on the relations of power in which our own theoretical activities are enmeshed, on the practices of 'governance' on the basis of which our theorising proceeds. This is part of what was involved in the idea of an 'empty' metaphysics that I spoke of earlier. On this model, it is not a matter of finding certain entities or structures, or even a level of structuration, that is gives the primary ontology, but rather of understanding ontology as itself a matter of grasping the generation of a domain through the dynamic, structured, reciprocal interplay of elements within it (one might say that this is precisely what is involved in the idea of a 'non-metaphysical' conception of ontology). Similarly, if we take seriously the interconnection of ontology with methodology, then a proper understanding of method ought to involve an understanding of the way in which any domain is indeed generated through this sort of interplay, and cannot be understood through appeal to any 'methodology' that insists on a single level of explanation or description or on a single structure or entity as the basis for all else. Here the necessary interconnection of ontology and methodology is reinforced once again.

I have already emphasised the way in which the sort of general ontological account being offered here, and which I have also claimed to find in Heidegger and Foucault, is quite different from any traditional form of metaphysics and contains, indeed, a certain sort of anti-metaphysical critique. The account I have offered is, however, one that I have explicitly presented as committed to a certain general ontology, one that can be applied to all and any domain (although the exact details of the analysis in every case will differ), and, in this respect, it might be thought that the account remains, nonetheless, 'metaphysical'. I can put this point in terms of an

objection that has sometimes, in discussion, been put as an objection to the account of governance that I have advanced here, namely, that in looking to such a general ‘ontological’ account, one is thereby looking to identify a general explanatory factor in addition to those more specific and concrete factors that are operative in any particular instance. This objection can be seen as an instance of the ‘suspicion of metaphysics’ that I discussed earlier as a feature of much social scientific theorising – a suspicion that is manifest in an emphasis on concrete, empirical circumstances, particular to each case, over any more general account. In the case of my emphasis on failure within the account of governance, one might say that the objection at issue is that we do not need an ‘ontological’ account to explain or describe failure (or incompleteness or partiality) – we already have all we need in the particular circumstances that obtain in each case. To look for more than this is to look for an unnecessary additional level of explanation or description.

It seems to me that this sort of objection essentially misunderstands the nature of explanation or description. It is rather like claiming that to explain or to describe the operation of a particular car engine on the basis of an abstract understanding of the processes involved in the internal combustion engine in general is to postulate another cause of that engine’s capacity to do work in addition to the particular instances of those processes – the igniting of gas in this chamber producing an expansion of this gas moving this piston – involved in the operation of that particular engine. In fact, the general level of analysis is not additional to the more particular level. There is no primary level of explanation or description – to assume otherwise is precisely what is entailed in the tendency towards metaphysicality – moreover particular levels of explanation or description typically call upon or entail more general levels. Thus certain explanations and descriptions of the operation of this engine – the very one that is installed in the car I drive – are not independent of, but do indeed call upon other, more general explanatory and descriptive frameworks.

The fact that the account I have been outlining here does indeed retain a commitment to providing a certain general level of analysis that obtains across domains should not, then, be seen as compromising that analysis or leading to the analysis retaining some problematically ‘metaphysical’ orientation. To argue that the very attempt at generalisation across domains is problematic is to misunderstand the very project of understanding as such. It is only by looking to integrate phenomena within broader frames of analysis and to connect different phenomena together within more general schemas that phenomena are made intelligible, amenable to description and accessible to even limited forms of explanation. Indeed, it is precisely through such a generalising and unifying approach to phenomena that governance itself operates in defining the objects to which its attention is directed. And, in this respect, all governing projects are the same inasmuch as they establish – or, if one prefers, ‘subjugate’ – certain phenomena as objects within specific governmental frames. Consequently, one need not view the tendency towards generality that is an element in ‘metaphysicality’ as problematic in itself. It merely exemplifies, in a particular form, a tendency that is an inevitable feature of any project of understanding and of any governmental project as such. Similarly, there is no escape from the need to attend to questions of ontology – to think that we can is not a way of somehow escaping metaphysics, but only throws us back into it once more.

The critique of metaphysics cannot be accomplished by simply rejecting any form of general ontological analysis. In this respect, while the account I have offered here does indeed oppose itself to metaphysics, or a certain sort of metaphysics, it does not do so simply by the outright rejection of metaphysics (a rejection that typically abjures metaphysics on the one hand while nevertheless reasserting it on the other).. Thus the account I have advanced is one that stakes a stand against traditional metaphysics on the basis of a certain

definite ontological, and therefore also methodological, position. Indeed, the account offered here actually makes possible an answer both to the question why traditional metaphysics is problematic and why the tendency towards metaphysicality is nevertheless a recurrent feature of inquiry.

For Heidegger, of course, the tendency towards metaphysics is a function of what he called in Being and Time, ‘falling’ (Verfallenheit) and that is exemplified, in one form, in a tendency on the part of agents to become immersed in their activities in such a way that they are blinded to anything that lies outside and in a way that also leads agents to identify activities with their results. Thus agents are typically forgetful of the larger frameworks in which particular activities are embedded, typically viewing things only in terms of the extent to which they can be acted upon so as to achieve certain results and also come to view activity itself in ways that often fail to reflect their dynamic character. Modern empiricism and scientism, and modern technology, are, for Heidegger, one manifestation of this tendency towards understanding the world in terms of what is achievable and manipulable. In general terms, metaphysics can be seen as rising out of a tendency to view the world in terms of only those aspects or features that are presented within particular forms of activity within the world. In terms of the account of governance, the metaphysical tendency towards understanding things in terms of a single structure, entity or set of entities arises as a natural consequence of the viewing of the world from within the framework of particular governing projects – such a narrowing of vision arising as a natural consequence of the need to focus on objects in just those respects in which they are subject to governing control. The generalising and ‘reductive’ character of metaphysics thus arises as a consequence of the way in which governance involves the combination of a certain narrowness of focus onto just those aspects relevant to governmental control together with the breadth of governmental ambition that is implicit in the very attempt at control. Metaphysics is governance writ large – but with its narrowness of vision and breadth of ambition writ larger still.

In this respect the sort of ontological account I have sketched here is one that gives special emphasis to the partial and limited character of every project, whether ‘theoretical’ or ‘practical’ and to the inevitable tendency for those projects to fall short of their goals. But understanding the limited and partial character of any and every project is only possible on the basis of an ontological account of what makes possible any such project at all. In this respect the critique of metaphysics is only possible on the basis, not of some set of supposedly ‘neutral’ methodological observations or precepts, but of an account of the ontological and methodological basis for all forms of inquiry and for all domains of inquiry. This is a point that was already clearly evident in Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason and it is a point that marks out the Kantian critique of metaphysics from almost any previous attempt at such a critique. Indeed, one can view the anti-metaphysical positions formulated prior to Kant as largely consisting in forms of scepticism that were unable to stop their own sceptical weapons being used against them (this was certainly Kant’s view of Hume’s position for instance). Kant was certainly not hostile to scepticism and its anti-metaphysical tendencies, but explicitly viewed it as an advance over the dogmatism that is typical of the metaphysician.ⁱⁱⁱ The Kantian criticism of scepticism, and so of earlier forms of anti-metaphysics, consisted simply in the fact that, while scepticism sets limits to the understanding and so shows the pretensions of metaphysics to be false, it provides no account of that on the basis of which those limits obtain^{iv} and so cannot provide any ground for those limits without itself lapsing into dogmatism. It is this that Kant aims, in part, to remedy.^v I would characterise the account of governance I have advanced here, along with the ‘ontological’ projects I have attempted to discern in Foucault and Heidegger, as operating along rather similar lines to those found in Kant – as establishing the limits and parameters of social scientific or philosophical inquiry through the articulation of the ontological and methodological structure that underlies it.

In this respect, such approaches can be viewed as attempts to formulate a position that retains the anti-metaphysicality of scepticism, while resisting the dogmatism to which scepticism is prone, by providing an account of that which both constitutes and limits all forms of inquiry.

Of course, the thinking of both Foucault, and also Heidegger, is often associated with a tendency towards historicisation and this might be thought a common feature of many such 'sceptical' and 'anti-metaphysical' approaches. One escapes metaphysics, it seems, through an assertion of absolute socio-historical particularity and determination. This has been especially true of the way in which Foucault's thought has often been taken up within the social sciences – Foucault is seen as promoting a mode of analysis that looks only to the particular socio-historical circumstances in which phenomena are embedded. Sometimes a similar tendency is discerned in Heidegger particularly in the emphasis, in the later Heidegger, on the idea of there being successive stages in the 'History of Being' (direct parallels have been drawn with Foucault on this point). This might be seen as presenting certain problems for the analysis I have advanced here in the sense that such a historicised approach must be inconsistent with my emphasis on a general ontological analysis, or else it might be thought to imply that the general ontological account I have sketched must be instantiated differently in different socio-historical circumstances in such a way that the ontology could be viewed as determined by those circumstances and unique to them (thereby effectively making spurious any claims to real generality).

In fact, while it is, of course, the case that how any ontological structure is instantiated will depend very much on concrete socio-historical circumstances, this need not imply that one cannot generalise in such cases. More importantly, however, it is important to recognise the way in which, once again, the tendency to historicisation can be viewed as another manifestation as a tendency towards metaphysicality and this is so whether we treat such historicisation in terms of the idea of a 'History of Being' or in terms of the more mundane idea that all phenomena are socio-historical products to be explained only socio-historically. The thrust of my reading of Foucault and Heidegger as engaged in an anti-metaphysical critique (albeit a constructive critique) is that there is no level of analysis, no single structure or entity that is ontologically – and this means explanatorily or descriptively – primary. Historical circumstance is no more a privileged level of analysis than is any other. Moreover the necessary partiality and multiplicity that accompanies all activity, every exercise of power, any governmental practice implies a corresponding multiplicity in the ways in which particular phenomena can be addressed. Recognising the way in which objects and practices arise as elements within complex, differentiated and interconnected fields ought to lead to a recognition of the need to carefully attend to the complexity and differentiated character of those interconnections, but it ought also to lead to a recognition of the impossibility of any specification of the interconnections in their entirety – inquiry, whether social scientific or philosophical, is always characterised by a partiality of vision and a multiplicity of approaches. Understanding phenomena in their socio-historical specificity need not entail any form of ontological relativisation nor need it imply the priority of the historical over other forms of analysis.

This point is especially important when it comes to the attempt to understand, describe or explain intellectual practices or productions. The project of careful, historically situated description of particular practices, objects, ways of life, or modes of thought does not rule out other projects that may take up those practices, objects and so forth under different, if sometimes related, frames. Thus, a particular philosophical position or a specific political movement may be understood both as it arises within a quite specific and localised set of historical circumstances, on the one hand, and, on the other, in terms of those elements within it that have or purport to have a broader and more universal application. To suppose otherwise, and to think that the

necessary situatedness of intellectual production implies the necessary restriction of the ideas produced to just the original situation in which they appeared, is to confuse the conditions of intellectual production with the conditions of intellectual concern. Moreover, that a position is elaborated under quite specific historical or cultural circumstances, while it may shed useful light on the question of how that position is to be understood, has little relevance to the question as to whether or not that position is logically consistent, supported by the available evidence, or, most fundamentally perhaps, whether the claims in which that position consists are true.^{vi}

Of course it may well be said that truth itself is constituted only within particular governing practices and so within quite specific historical, cultural or even political locations. In this case truth would itself be an 'effect' of the complex ontology of 'governance' or 'power'. Yet while the terms in which any particular claim may be couched are certainly dependent for their meaning on the particular context in which that claim is situated, the truth of the claim is not, for the most part, determined by context in just that way.^{vii} A particular governing practice, a particular field of power-relations, can be seen as establishing – in Foucault's phrase – a particular 'regime of truth'. But to say that it does this is, on our account, no more than to say that it establishes a certain semantics – it establishes the meanings of the terms employed within it – and a certain framework for verifying the truth or falsity of particular claims. Such a regime of truth does not establish any system of truths as such, but only a method for deciding on what is to be held true. For example, the governmental practice associated with the maintenance of a motor vehicle provides us with a framework within which we can assign a certain meaning to particular terms and utterances, and it provides us at the same time with a framework within which we can decide whether or not certain utterances should be held true, but it does not determine the actual truth or falsity of those utterances. Indeed, that it cannot do that is a corollary of the necessary incompleteness and partiality of all practices, projects and power. Truth extends beyond any particular governmental practice or system of power relations just as things themselves do. Indeed, in Heidegger, truth is itself tied to the very possibility of the appearance – the disclosure – of things.^{viii}

The emphasis on the limited and partial character of all theoretical and practical activity is something that ought to lead us to be sceptical of the pretensions of metaphysics wherever they arise. But it ought also lead us to be sceptical of the metaphysical pretensions that are expressed, quite frequently in social scientific circles, in the idea that social theory is committed to a certain set of socially ameliorative or politically progressive goals. Often the commitment to such ideals springs both from an exaggerated view of the capacities of governmental control and from a tendency towards metaphysical modes of thought – from a view of governance as geared towards success rather than failure, and from a tendency to understand the world as ordered around single structures or entities rather than in terms of a field constituted by the reciprocal interplay or contestation among mutually defining and mutually limiting elements. The ontologically constructive 'anti-metaphysics' outlined here suggests, however, is that practical social and political intervention can only ever be partial and localised – and must always be prepared to adjust itself in the face of the resisting and recalcitrant character of its objects. In this respect, a theoretically sophisticated social theory ought to be a constant reminder to those who would offer narratives of social improvement and political progress of the necessary limitation, and inevitable tendency to failure, of all such narratives, rather than being itself caught up in the formulation of such stories.

The critique of metaphysics need not imply a rejection of ontological modes of analysis, but does indeed depend on such analysis. Moreover, the connection of ontology with methodology suggests that not only is ontological analysis a necessary component in the formulation of social, and philosophical, theorising, but it also indicates the way in which the articulation of a social-theoretical or philosophical self-conception must be

bound up, not only with methodological, but also with ontological considerations. To reflect on the nature and practice of social theory, of philosophy of socio-legal study, is also to reflect on the ontology that governs these and all such domains. Moreover, the self-reflexivity that is implied here does not function only at the theoretical or even disciplinary level. Pierre Hadot's Philosophy as a Way of Life emphasises the way in which Classical and Hellenistic conceptions of philosophy were essentially tied to the idea of philosophy as an activity essentially directed, not so much at the achievement of knowledge, as a certain kind of self-formation. Philosophical practice was thus directed primarily at the self rather than the world. This idea is, of course, an important element in the late Foucault's interest in practices of self-government as it can also be discerned in some of Nietzsche's writing. Such an emphasis on self-formation is, in fact, a characteristic feature of philosophy, and perhaps of intellectual disciplines, in general. Such disciplines are typically directed at the formation of a certain kind of self, as much as they are directed at the achievement of certain forms of knowledge. One might take this as exemplary of the 'metaphysical' or even 'religious' background in which intellectual life has often been embedded. It certainly is partly indicative of this. Of greater significance, however, is the way in which the characterisation of intellectual work as always a work of self-formation can be seen to derive from the ontological constitution of selves and practices within the same 'governmental' field. Every form of activity or practice involves self-formation and self-constitution, inasmuch as the self is a structure defined and established only through its involvement in projective activity, in systems of power and resistance, in practices of governance. Of course, such processes of self-formation, precisely because they are self-formative, can never be completely controlled or directed. The project of self-formation is as limited and constrained, and just as unpredictable, as is any other project whether at the governmental, corporative or individual level. In this respect, the task of the social theorist, of the philosopher, is not so much one of attempting purposively to change or to redirect the field of governmental activity, as of mapping its dynamic, complex and differentiated character.

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ⁱ Jonathan H. Turner, The Structure of Sociological Theory, 5th edn (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1991), p.1-2.

ⁱⁱ See, for instance, Rosalind Coward and John Ellis who oppose a scientific “materialism” rooted, not only in Marx, but in the work of Lacan, Kristeva and others, to that “bourgeois idealist thought” whose “corrosive influence” has, they claim, inhibited work in “the fields of linguistics, literary criticism, social sciences, political philosophy and psychoanalysis” (Coward and Ellis, Language and Materialism [London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977], p.9). The suspicion of any approach deemed to deviate from the path of materialism and empiricism is an often implicit feature of much contemporary work in a variety of fields in the social sciences and humanities – sometimes fuelled, it might be said, by rather naïve readings of writers such as, not only Marx, but also, for instance, Derrida.

ⁱⁱⁱ“The first step in matters of pure reason, marking its infancy, is dogmatic. The second step is sceptical; and indicates that experience has rendered our judgment wiser and more circumspect. But a third step, such as can be taken only by fully matured judgment, based on assured principles of proved universality, is now necessary, namely, to subject to examination, not the facts of reason, but reason itself, in the whole extent of its powers, and as regards its aptitude for pure a priori modes of knowledge” (Critique of Pure Reason, A761/B789).

^{iv} See, for instance, Critique of Pure Reason, A767-768/B795-796.

^v Though this is not the only task he sets himself. In particular he has a more positive conception of the task of the Critique as making possible a certain articulation and defence of the structure of practical, that is to say, moral employment of reason See Critique of Pure Reason, Bxxv.

^{vi} To suppose otherwise is essentially to commit what is a version of the so-called ‘genetic fallacy’, that is, it is to take the circumstances under which a view is generated as grounds for the falsity of that view. For a defence of the idea of truth as objective that underlies our comments here, see Malpas, ‘Speaking the Truth’, Economy and Society 25 (1996), pp.156-177.

^{vii} If there is an exception here, it is in the case of those performative utterances that may also be construed, on some analyses, as possessing a truth value. Thus, if one takes the utterance ‘I hereby swear...’ as a claim, and so as having a truth value, as well as being the performance of an act of swearing, then the context that determines the meaning of the words uttered also determines the truth value of the sentence in which those words appear.

^{viii}For a more detailed discussion and defence of the concept of truth see Malpas, ‘Speaking the Truth’.