In this ambitious and densely argued book, N. L. M. Nathan defends a general theory about the nature of metaphysics and metaphysical questions (in chapters 1, 2 and 10) and then applies the theory to two metaphysical questions about the will--its existence (in the form of the existence of "real volitions" (chapters 8 and 9)) and its freedom (chapters 3-7). Nathan argues that many metaphysical questions can be understood as conflicts between what persons want or desire and what they believe. Thus, they may want to possess a certain kind of freedom or free will, but believe they do no possess it because they believe in some form of determinism or fatalism, which seems to rule it out. Or they may want there to be objective moral values or certain foundations for knowledge or non-material selves (a real external world or a provident God), but believe, for one reason or another, that these things do not exist.

Such want-belief conflicts, as Nathan calls them, may be first- or second-order. The conflict is first-order when something is desired (say, the existence of an objective good), but the agent believes it does not exist. The conflict is second-order when the agent wants to believe in something, but believes the evidence is insufficient for believing it. Wants and beliefs conflict in both cases, but in the first case the belief directly denies the existence of what is wanted, while in the second case the conflicting belief is that there is insufficient evidence for believing what one wants to believe. Resolution of the conflict in either case involves forsaking the want, or the belief which conflicts with it.

If we look at metaphysical questions in this way, Nathan thinks we would be led to ask certain questions in the attempt to resolve
them. First, our attention would be drawn to the content of the desire or want that generates the conflict. Does that desire have a coherent content? Does the free will or objective goodness or disembodied ego we want to believe in make any sense? Second, we should ask why the disputed content is wanted. Do we want it for its own sake or for the sake of something else? If we want, say, free will for its own sake, then what kind of intrinsic value does it possess? If we want it for the sake of something else (say, moral responsibility), is it really a necessary condition for that other thing and does that other thing have intrinsic value? Third, we must ask whether the evidence for the existence of what is wanted really does tell against it or is insufficient to support it. Fourth, and finally, he says, “if it has somehow been decided that the conflict should not be resolved, then the victim’s awareness that there are disadvantages in things being as he wants may at least diminish the force of his desire.” (p. 20) In such a case, we look for what Nathan calls “palliatives”—something else the person may want to be the case that could be the case if the original disputed want there fulfilled.

My first reaction to this interesting account of metaphysical questions was to think that, while it helps us to understand many traditional metaphysical conflicts, it does not apply to all of them. For example, metaphysical speculation can sometimes be provoked by conflict between different beliefs where the enquirer does not have a vested interest in the truth of either belief. This might be the case, for example, of Kant’s first two antinomies, of Zeno’s problems about the continuum, or various paradoxes, like the liar, the sorites, Prisoner’s Dilemma or Newcomb’s paradox. But Nathan accounts for this kind of objection in the final chapter where he sums up his view. Metaphysical speculation, he concedes, may be provoked by belief-belief conflicts as well as by want-belief conflicts. But he argues that want-belief conflicts are the more “irksome.” Or incompatible beliefs, we know that only one can be true. “But there is no such assurance in the case of wanting p to be true and believing it false. Each attitude can be perfectly reasonable, and their joint possession a permanent affliction.” (p. 161)

Thus, want-belief conflicts turn out to be crucial for the construction of what Nathan calls “self-critical world views.” A