Introduction

One of the most remarkable features of mid-to-late-twentieth-century analytic philosophy is the revival of interest in the traditional problems of metaphysics. It is true that philosophers never really abandoned metaphysics, at least in the sense that they never stopped making metaphysical claims of one sort or another. But it is undoubtedly the case that, at least officially, metaphysics was in very bad odour in mainstream circles prior to Kripke’s (1972) rediscovery of necessary a posteriori propositions. For ever since Hume consigned metaphysics to the flames, and Kant asked how synthetic a priori propositions are possible, philosophers had grown accustomed to the idea that no profit is to be had from metaphysical reflection as traditionally understood. Metaphysics, once the queen of the sciences, was exposed by these Enlightenment thinkers as an impossibility, and its practitioners, however well intentioned, deluded. The passage of time seemed to confirm this assessment, and the only matter of dispute was how one should react to the death of metaphysics. Some, Kant for instance, emphasised the tragic aspect of metaphysics’ calamities, for we cannot but ask metaphysical questions even when we know they cannot be answered (1965, p. 7). Others positively welcomed the demise of metaphysics as it was nothing more than a mask concealing a will to power that needed to be exposed for what it was.¹ Still others were more sanguine, maintaining that philosophy can get along just fine without metaphysics, either because philosophy has other business to attend to,² or because our
metaphysicians find themselves in an exciting, but ultimately unstable position: Many of us are now convinced that metaphysical questions are worth pursuing, but we still lack a convincing story to offer our detractors about how we conduct our business *qua* metaphysicians. This book is an attempt to provide such a story.

And the core recommendation is this: Contemporary metaphysicians need not reinvent the discipline out of whole cloth. Much time and energy can be saved if we are willing to learn from the past masters, particularly the Scholastics. Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham and Suarez, the leading figures from the golden and silver ages of Scholasticism, provide plausible answers to our meta-metaphysical and methodological questions if only we are willing to listen. They also have tenable answers to first-order metaphysical questions, answers that deserve to be seen as serious contributions to our ongoing efforts at metaphysical reflection.

This recommendation is hard for many to swallow. While it is often a sensible tactic in chess to retreat the better to advance, this is not a standard move in philosophical contexts. Moreover, like Hobbes, most analytic philosophers labour under the false impression that ‘the Schoolmen’ were purveyors of a ‘dark’ and ‘vain’ philosophy expressed in ‘insignificant Traines of strange or barbarous words’ about obscure metaphysical entities justified only by empty ratiocinations and verbal disputations carried out under the suspicious eye of an ever vigilant Church. It would take a book length study to explain how this gross caricature came to be so widely accepted amongst philosophers from the early modern period