Below are thoughts generated for Philosophy 490: Seminar on Metaphilosophy, in the Spring of 2004. While you won’t know the players, the ideas are relevant to an understanding of how I approach philosophy.

Our recent conversations have sparked a number of thoughts for me, and I thought I would write them down and pass them out. I make no promises concerning the value of these thoughts. Take them or, preferably, criticize them and then leave them.

1. We began with the question, “What is philosophy?” This is a call for explanation—we want to explain, or “unpack”, the concept philosophy. Victoria and Nathan both recommended that we get clear on this question before we proceed, and I believe they are correct. Victoria pointed out that the question is ambiguous, since ‘philosophy’ can be taken to refer to the academic discipline or conceptual practices that transcend any one particular discipline. Nathan encouraged us to see the question as elliptical and in need of completion. He argued that when we ask this question, we can mean either, “What is the scope/domain of philosophy?”, “What are the methods of philosophy?”, “What are the products of philosophy?”, and “What are the goals of philosophy?” [Notice that the question could be both incomplete and ambiguous; for instance, one might see Victoria’s ambiguity arising with respect to each of these completions, especially the first. Note also that this looks a lot like philosophy—perhaps it is telling that we appear to be doing philosophy before we even get started along the road toward explanation.]

2. One argument in favor of Nathan’s approach is the affinity between his list and Aristotle’s Theory of Aitia (i.e., his Doctrine of Causes). For Aristotle, aitia are whatever answer “why”-questions; as J. Moravcsik puts it, they are “explanatory factors.” In the Metaphysics, Aristotle distinguishes between efficient causation (i.e., billiard ball causation), formal causation (i.e., the way in which a thing’s nature is determined by its structure or form), material causation (i.e., the matter that determines what a thing is), and final causation (i.e., the goal or purpose toward which a thing is directed). Here, scope lines up with material, methods with formal, products with efficient, and goals with final. While this is not a proof, it at least establishes that
there is an independently principled reason for taking this list to be unified and not ad hoc. This is a sort of “top down” analysis of the question, driven by antecedent theoretical commitments. (See Moravcsik, J., “Aristotle on Adequate Explanations”.) Keep in mind that an answer to any one of these will likely constrain how one answers the other four.

3. One can also try to get at the proper set of completions by doing a “bottom up” analysis, beginning with the “what”-questions and attempting to systematize them as we find them. We can use “what”-questions to get at purposes: “What is that for?”, or perhaps in a doctor’s office, “What is that shot?” We clearly can get at constitution: “What is that on my shoe?” Form can be queried: “What is the difference between a statue and a hunk of marble?” And then there is efficient causation, or impetus: “What happened?” Are there other questions? Is there any other general characteristic that one might want to know about a thing? [Note that this works as an argument for lining up “what”-questions with “why”-questions. In the philosophy of science literature, there are arguments for collapsing “why”-questions into “how”-questions. Where does this leave us? What does this reveal?]

4. On to our attempts at answering the question, “What is philosophy?”. We have seen a number of pithy attempts to characterize philosophy: dialogue, strategy, method, theory, love of wisdom, “letting the fly out of the fly bottle”, worldview construction & maintenance, theoretical systematization, systematic criticism, etc. (There are others: philosophy as reflective living, as synoptic theorizing, etc.) We can call these expansive definitions, since they see philosophy in many places. On the positive side, they make our business seem more important because it is ubiquitous; also, they make it seem close to human life—an expression of who we are as a species. On the negative side, they obviate traditional distinctions between philosophy and other pursuits (e.g., literary criticism, debate, political discourse, war planning, etc.); further, they threaten to minimize philosophy through dissipation. Note that these seem to cut across Nathan’s framework: there is philosophy characterized in terms of process (i.e., form), content (i.e., matter), effect (i.e., efficient cause), and purpose. Must we look for some systematic combination of these things?

5. There are also more detailed attempts that we might term contractive definitions, e.g., philosophy as conceptual work that is not science, philosophy as the combination of metaphysics, epistemology, and value theory, philosophy as the (circular) process of thought-question-dialogue-criticism-reformulation, etc. These narrow the scope of philosophy, perhaps to the point where some things that look philosophical don’t qualify (e.g., conceptual work concerning the interpretation of literature, perhaps, or artworks as done by the practitioners themselves). This problem can be dealt
with by distinguishing between a thing’s being *philosophical* and a thing’s being *philosophy*. (For instance, we allow that something can be *humorous* without being *humor*.)

6. How can we adjudicate disputes among these, and between these and other candidate characterizations? How do we go about assigning weight to the considerations adduced above? Must we? This is where the question concerning the nature of metaphilosophy is best addressed. Do we see metaphilosophy as a philosophical enterprise, or as a naturalistic one? The former seems attractive, since it would appear that all we’ve been doing is philosophy in this class. But how can this be done in a way that is principled? After all, we have done it analytically because I am an analytic philosopher, but that would certainly be held up for criticism by someone who is not similarly predisposed from a methodological perspective. How do we arrive at agreement concerning the operative principles here? Alternatively, we can engage in naturalistic description of the practice, but the problem with this is that it seems to help itself with an undefended conception of “paradigm cases” of philosophy. Surely this depends on some sort of uncriticized intuition about the answer to the question we are considering.

7. So where does this leave us? We might try to argue that the proper approach isn’t *investigatory* but rather *experiential*. Our knowledge of philosophy on this view is akin to our knowledge of riding a bicycle or playing the piano—it’s procedural and not propositional knowledge. To ask for something like the latter is to miss the point. We western, neo-classical analyticos are always opting for product over process, and it always gets us into trouble. But why?