Braddon-Mitchell, D. and R. Nola, eds, Conceptual Analysis and Philosophical Naturalism, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009, pp. ix + 370, US$40.00 (paperback).

For Marco Polo in Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities, Venice is the one true city from whose structure all possible cities can be deduced. In that case, Venice is the reciprocal of Canberra, whose plan was abstracted from all the many actual cities, but which nevertheless lacks the essence of a city. What, then, of the other Canberra Plan, that blueprint for philosophical problem-solving largely designed in our nation’s capital by David Lewis and Frank Jackson? Is it a pale shadow of philosophy, or the method by which the solution to all philosophical problems can be deduced?

In Calvino’s book, Polo purports to describe to a reclining Kublai Khan the many cities he has visited, though in fact he is always only describing Venice in different ways, without ever calling it by name. At one point, Kublai reverses the dialogue: ‘From now on I shall describe the cities and you will tell me if they exist and are as I have conceived them’ [Calvino: 43]. This is just how philosophy is done on the Canberra Plan. Daniel Nolan calls it the Canberra two-step [269]. Step 1, conceptual analysis: from the armchair describe, without naming, some philosophically interesting thing—e.g. meaning, minds, morality—according to our conception of it. The long description, suitably formalized in the way Frank Ramsey and Rudolf Carnap taught us, is called the Ramsey sentence. Step 2, empirical discovery: release the explorers to scour the natural world in search of the thing which best satisfies the Ramsey sentence. Does nothing fit the description passably well? Then minds, say, do not exist. Does something fit it, but only roughly? Then only minds* exist, which are not quite minds as we conceive them.

When Lewis first elaborated this approach he was aiming to locate minds in the natural world. At step 1 he described (or imagined he could describe) all the causal interactions we take mental states to indulge in both amongst themselves and with the natural world. The quest at step 2 assumed the natural world is causally closed so that if such states exist they must themselves be natural. This approach was later extended by Lewis and Jackson to other, perhaps all, philosophical problems. But, as several contributions to this excellent volume insist, for armchair philosophers like Kublai Khan, empire building is never easy.

Peter Menzies and Huw Price argue, for example, that Lewis’s paradigm application of the method does not extend unproblematically to things that stand no chance of being defined in terms of their causal interactions, such as morality, meaning, or causation itself. They claim that if it is to be extended to these topics, then the role of causal relations in Lewis’s example must be replaced by semantic relations between the target term and the world. But even if this works, then on pain of circularity the plan can’t extend to semantic notions themselves.

Denis Robinson focuses on how Jackson applies the plan to moral notions. Robinson rightly asks how Jackson can find a shared conceptualization of moral rightness given the undeniable extent of disagreement about the actions to which this
concept should be applied. Jackson says the relevant Ramsey sentence can be derived from an ideal, future moral consensus and thinks he can remain a moral objectivist. Robinson argues, in a characteristically intriguing paper, that reflecting on the nature of moral disagreement should lead us to sophisticate our account of moral concepts and to adopt a view he calls moral quasi-relativism: the view that fundamental moral disagreements can be irresolvable while being neither merely verbal disputes nor logical disagreements (they are quasi-disagreements).

Daniel Nolan also wonders how we identify the platitudes which go to make up the Ramsey sentence and offers an illuminating range of options. In addition, he asks how the plan can be extended to fundamental metaphysical questions (about the nature of causation, for example) where there seems to be no obvious equivalent of Step 2. If Nolan is right, there are various ways to extend the plan, but, in this reviewer’s opinion, the extension hardly seems worth the effort.

Problems with identifying the content of the relevant Ramsey sentence also arise in the chapter consisting of an email exchange between Jackson and Steve Stich and Kelby Mason. In particular, Stich and Mason push Jackson on what he means by saying that we have an implicit, folk theory of psychology which should serve as a target for Ramsification. But despite this chapter’s promise, the disputants soon lose each other in a Canberra petitfog. As a result, the triologue fails to deliver a rigorous discussion of whether the relevant facts about our concepts can really be discovered a priori (though this issue is discussed further in David Braddon-Mitchell’s contribution).

Beyond empire building, modern Canberra Planners are like the Khan in other ways. As Polo says, ‘No one, wise Kublai, knows better than you that the city must never be confused with the words that describe it. And yet between the one and the other there is a connection’ [Calvino: 61]. Similarly, Jackson is wise to the errors of the old ways of conceptual analysis which proceeded by analysing the meaning of words. Yet language still plays a key role. For Jackson, a significant part of a conceptual analysis of the concept CITY is a consideration of the circumstances in which we apply the term ‘city’ to a collection of things. Moreover, as he makes clear in his solo contribution, part of his case for the Canberra Plan rests on an optimism about our ability to express in words the similarities between all things which are cities (or minds, or whatever) [108–10]. Justine Kingsbury and Jonathan McKeown-Green defend the value of Canberra Planning in general and yet take issue with just these ways of connecting it with semantic competence.

Language enters the Canberra Plan in other ways, too, particularly in the descriptivist view of names it shares with Marco Polo. Recalling his first encounter with a certain city, he says that from ‘that moment the name Pyrrha has brought to my mind this view, this light, this buzzing, this air in which a yellowish dust flies: obviously the name means this and could mean nothing but this’ [Calvino: 92]. Not so, said Kripke: it’s not descriptions that matter for naming, but causal relations between names and their referents. But while legions have followed him, Fred Kroon, like Lewis and Jackson, heroically defends descriptivism. Kroon builds causal-historical relations into the descriptions associated with names, arguing that only so can we explain the fact that our referential practices involving names are rooted in our awareness of causal-informational relations we stand in to their referents. Yet given the often idiosyncratic ways that the objects we refer to are cognitively available to us, this also leads to an important concession: descriptivism can be no more than a theory of reference determination. It cannot give the semantic content of names. In recent times, descriptivism has also been sophisticated and bolstered by the development of two-dimensional semantics, which is now another hallmark of the Canberra Plan. As David Braddon-Mitchell points out, however, the
turn to 2D semantics makes it even harder to see how the Canberra Plan can be applied to metaphysics, since 2D semantics implies that competing false metaphysical theses will all be analytically equivalent. In response, Braddon-Mitchell sketches an account of the hyper-intensional to alleviate the worry.

Another feature of the Canberra Plan is a commitment to the following conditional: if physicalism is true, then all facts are *a priori* derivable from the physical facts. That is, if physicalism is true and we are given a complete physical description of a collection of things, then we could determine *a priori* that it is a city being described, just as Kublai eventually infers that Venice is the subject of all Polo’s descriptions. Or, as Jackson puts it in his contribution, a physicalist Canberra Planner thinks that the similarities between all things to which we apply the concept *city* are *a priori* determined by the nature of physical elements and their arrangement [107]. Somewhat disappointingly the only argument Jackson gives for this *a priori* closure claim is that he can think of no counter-examples to it and that scientists implicitly take it for granted. Fortunately, Philip Pettit considers the same issue in more depth. Although he also doesn’t argue for an *a priori* entailment claim, he does attempt to explain why such a thesis may be true even if in many cases we can’t perform the derivation. According to Pettit, for some properties we are either cognitively or technologically barred from inferring their presence from an appropriate physical description—while the property is a pattern in the physical, no amount of training will teach us how to spot that pattern. He calls this ‘deep derivational deficiency’ and argues that we suffer from it in relation to mental states that not only represent the environment but also that the environment is being so represented. Nevertheless, such deficiencies do not show that there is no *a priori* entailment and they may be remediable [263].

As Pettit acknowledges, his view is similar to Daniel Stoljar’s epistemic view of consciousness defended in his *Ignorance and Imagination*. Stoljar returns to the topic of conscious experience here, giving a fuller treatment of the doctrine of Revelation, which is the thesis that having an experience puts us in a position to know its full nature. Lewis once argued that such a thesis is a fundamental feature of our folk conception of conscious experience, but is inconsistent with physicalism. Thus, conscious experiences, strictly so called, do not exist. Stoljar agrees that Revelation is inconsistent with physicalism, but argues that it is neither a natural nor a central conception of experience. In this instance, then, the Canberra Plan should not be followed. We don’t need to settle for experiences*. We should just reject Revelation.

The opposite of Revelation is Humility. Revelation is a claim about certain essences being open to view. Humility is a claim about certain essences being forever hidden. In Lewis’s paper, ‘Ramseyan Humility’, he argues that we are irremediably ignorant of the identities of the fundamental properties that satisfy the Ramsey sentence of our true, final theory of the world. Why? Because we are unable to notice the difference between the actual world and different possibilities where the fundamental properties are either permuted amongst themselves or replaced by properties which in the actual world play no causal roles. Lewis’s paper had already been much discussed even before it was published here for the first time. Dustin Locke’s concise summary of some influential criticisms of Lewis’s argument, and the defences he offers on Lewis’s behalf, are thus very helpful.

So what does this volume teach us about the Canberra Plan? It reminds us that ‘[i]n the lives of emperors there is a moment which follows pride in the boundless extension of the territories we have conquered, and the melancholy and relief of knowing we shall soon give up any thought of knowing and understanding them . . . It is the desperate moment when we discover that this empire, which seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless, formless ruin’ [Calvino: 5]. The Canberra Plan is
serious philosophy, but it is not the unique philosophical method. So it is not like Venice; but then nothing ever will be, not even Venice.

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Reference

Calvino, I. 1997. *Invisible Cities*, London: Vintage Classics, trans. William Weaver.

Ellis, Brian, *The Metaphysics of Scientific Realism*, Durham: Acumen, 2009, pp. xi + 179, £16.99 [paper].

Scientific realists distinguish those theoretical posits warranted by empirical results from those that motivate and explain the results but are not strictly required to obtain them. Holistic, indiscriminate endorsement of empirically successful theories cannot withstand the lesson of the history of failed science. How to draw this distinction, and whether it can be drawn consistently without realist presuppositions, are contentious issues, for current physics is used to decide which posits of past physics were responsible for its success. However those issues are resolved, that realism depends on the viability of such a distinction has pretty well been established by the sceptical historical induction. Realism works only if there is no such induction against the particular posits to which realists are committed.

Brian Ellis is a realist about entities posited in causal process theories. But this is because he thinks these are the ones needed to explain the results. Explanation, not causation, drives his ontology, an ontology which will include in its categories properties, powers, causes, events, propensities and dispositions, and, in its scientific posits, particles, fields, waves, spatiotemporal and numerical relations—whatever he needs for explanation. This ontological extravagance in effect ignores the lesson of history. Ellis’s ambition is for a full-scale metaphysics that explains everything that our best-confirmed current science says. His scientific realism takes this current science at face value and adds considerable metaphysical commitment on top of it, enough for a plausible understanding of the nature of reality that accommodates all of physics. In his view, the cautious realist simply fails to explain that which it is the purpose of a philosophy of science to explain. Explanation requires a new ontology rich enough for current physics, just as atomism and causal powers metaphysically grounded the physics of the nineteenth century. Ellis endorses an argument for realism as the only philosophy that makes sense of scientific success, and he intermittently criticizes various non-realist positions. But, as he fails to engage the major antirealist challenge, I read him not as defending or motivating realism, but as telling us what the metaphysics of today’s committed realist should be.

The metaphysics we get from Ellis has clear motivations in contemporary physics, and is both original and persuasive. At its core is a distinction between ongoing physical processes, to which physical objects are reduced, and instantaneous events, which include all physical interactions, in particular all determinations of physical properties. The two are fundamentally distinct because changes of state violate the principle of locality; they occur instantaneously over spatially extended regions, unlike energy transmission processes that extend over temporal intervals. The two also obey different laws, but of course both satisfy conservation of energy. Since energy is conserved, it is more fundamental than its various