

Metaphysics: Introductory Remarks

Many topics are commonly called "Metaphysics". Most of these will not be studied in this course. For example, and especially, in some mass-market publications, Metaphysics is sometimes described with such phrases as "the study of the supernatural". Or, it is sometimes said to be "the study of things science can't explain" or "an inquiry into spiritual things" or "the investigation of occult or paranormal phenomena" such as reincarnation, post-mortem experiences, astral projection, contact with the spirit-world, etc.

There is no doubt whatever that such studies or inquiries as these are highly popular, not only in centuries past but today as well. We will not be studying any of the literature on these areas of interest in this course, at least not directly.

The reason we will not directly study them is not because they are not important or not worth discussing but because all of these so-called metaphysical subjects take a large number of beliefs completely *for granted* and the kinds of beliefs they typically take for granted are metaphysical beliefs in the sense of the term "metaphysics" which applies to the kind of philosophical literature we *will* be concerned with in this course.

Here is just one example of the kind of metaphysical belief taken for granted in many popular (so-called "metaphysical") books in the contexts of topics like reincarnation, post-mortem experiences, astral projection, contact with the spirit-world, etc. All discussions of these topics take for granted the possibility that a person and that person's body are two different things. *If* we were logically entitled to assume that to be at least a possibility, then it would become a question of whether such things actually occur.

Suppose, just for the sake of illustrating, that, somehow, we did establish the possibility that a person and his body are different things. Then, suppose that by means of additional arguments and evidence we were also able to establish that it is necessarily true that they are two different things. I'm not saying that it could be proved that persons and their bodies are necessarily different things. I'm just saying, for now, that, if this claim could be proved, then we would be logically entitled to infer that persons and their bodies are actually different things. That's just because, if something *must* necessarily be true, then it can't be false and so it *is* true. We might not have to prove *that* strong of a claim, though, in order to be logically entitled to believe that a person and his body are different things.

More on the point of supporting a less strong claim in a minute. First, another point about possibility and actuality.

Take the opposite sort of case. Suppose we were able to logically prove that a person and his body cannot possibly be two different things and that only bodies exist. This result would show that no person is actually anything other than his body. This result would put some of these popular metaphysical works in doubt. That's just because, if something is impossible, then it is not actually true. Of course, in mentioning this point, I am not claiming that such a thing can be proved to be impossible.

Now for the point about supporting a *weaker* claim than one about what is necessarily true or necessarily false.

If one were able to show by virtue of good evidence that persons and their bodies are in fact different things, because no other hypothesis would provide a sufficiently rational explanation of the evidence, then these popular works of "metaphysics" would clearly deserve some respect, at least to the extent that some of the things they take for granted would then be supported by good evidence. It would then reduce to a question of how good the evidence is and of whether any other available explanations of the evidence would be more rational than was the idea that persons and their bodies are different things.

However, these popular works of "metaphysics" ought then to be regarded as essentially empirical scientific investigations and their theories and hypotheses should then be judged according to the general standards of empirical science.

In the sense of "metaphysics" that we will be concerned with in this course, that would also mean that these theories were not genuinely metaphysical theories. They would be empirical sciences or at least contenders for the status of empirical sciences. The empirical sciences investigate either things that are known to exist, in the common meaning of "exist", or they try to establish whether certain kinds of things exist. (How do mosquitoes reproduce? Is there life on other planets? Does smoking by pregnant women cause fetal birth defects? Why do some drug addicts think their hallucinations are real?)

So, what is this subject called Metaphysics, i.e., the kind of metaphysics to be studied in this course? We have already provided some preliminary clues in what has been said so far. We have called attention to the distinction between claiming

that something does exist and claiming that it is possible that something exist. Obviously, if you know that something does actually exist then you also know that its existence is possible.

However, you need not know whether something actually exists in order to pursue the question of whether its existence is possible. For example, I need not know whether a person did commit a certain crime in order to seriously look into the question of whether it was possible for him to have committed it.

At this stage of the discussion, you might say "it's pointless to argue about anything except whether something does actually exist. Arguing about whether it's possible for something to exist is a waste of time because it's possible for anything whatever to exist!"

If you said something like this, you would have taken the plunge into metaphysics of the kind we are going to study. The brief argument I have just put between quotes takes various metaphysical claims and concepts for granted. First, it assumes a certain meaning of the word "possible" as *the* proper meaning of the word. It also assumes a certain meaning of "thing", of "actual" and a certain meaning of "exist". These concepts, of *possibility, existence, actuality, and thing*. are so basic and fundamental to our thinking that we rarely pay any attention to them in ordinary life and conversation, even though we rely on them all the time. They are also, typically and ordinarily, taken for granted in the sciences. Some further examples of metaphysical concepts which pervade nearly all of our thinking and talking, without our thinking much about them, are *Reality, Cause, Person, Change, Space, Time, Necessity*. You may be wondering why it is that we don't think much about these concepts if we use them as constantly as we do? Is it because we all understand these concepts so well that there is no need whatever to think about or examine them? Or is it because Socrates was right in his description of the majority of people as leading unexamined lives? More on this soon.

As I said, the kind of popular media subjects often called "metaphysics", might best be described as empirical science or at least as contenders for the status of empirical science. We now see another reason for describing them in this way. Like the other empirical sciences and like common sense beliefs, they take these basic concepts we have just mentioned for granted and do not subject them to any sort of critical examination or analysis.

Metaphysics of the sort we will study is a branch of Philosophy and, as such, takes nothing for granted, no matter how fundamental, basic, common or familiar. In Philosophy, every concept or belief or theory is to be subjected to fundamental critical examination.

We said that popular works of "metaphysics" are really attempts at empirical scientific theories. But, then, why isn't philosophical examination of the sort we just mentioned itself another kind of empirical science? Because every kind of empirical science must assume a definite meaning for some basic set of concepts. Physics, Chemistry, Biology, all investigate reality, try to determine what does exist and what does not exist, what the causes of various specific types of things, conditions and events may be, etc. But in doing this, it assumes, and must assume, that some things are not under empirical investigation, e.g. what a cause is or what a thing is, what an event is or what it is for something to exist. When the basic assumptions of science (or contenders for scientific standing) or common sense do get critically examined, one is then doing philosophy, not science *per se*.

Perhaps the most basic of concepts examined in Metaphysics are those of Existence, Being and Reality. All other fundamental concepts we have listed so far (Thing, Person, Cause, Change) seem to presuppose these. Granting this point, let us try for a definition of Metaphysics of the sort that belongs to Philosophy.

Suppose we try this:

1) *Metaphysics is the study of Reality*

This is some kind of a beginning but it won't do as it stands. "Reality" -- as opposed to what? Every discipline or subject, except works of fiction, could be said to be concerned with reality. But subjects like Biology or Geology are not branches of Metaphysics.

We might try to be a little more precise by presenting something like

2) *Metaphysics is the study of the way the world is.*

Like (1), this also includes too much. If I look to see whether there are any shirts in my closet, I am trying to find out something about the way the world is, but I am not doing metaphysics.

Metaphysics is much more general than this sort of particular inquiry into a particular part of the world (my closet). This element of generality helps to distinguish metaphysics from some other subjects but not enough of them. Astronomers and physicists investigate very general aspects of reality, even including the history of the universe as a whole. We need to isolate the sense in which metaphysics is distinct from any sort of empirical science. So, we may as well just insert the key word into the next revised attempt.

3) *Metaphysics is a field of inquiry that focuses on philosophical issues concerning the general nature and structure of the world.*

The key word in 3), of course is "philosophical". That has to be explained, too, but at least we have made progress now that we see what the key element in the definition is. So, what sort of question is a philosophical, as opposed to scientific, question?

Philosophy and Science were once related in something like the way that the whole animal kingdom is related to mammals. The first class includes the second. Mammals are animals of a particular sort. Once, it was the case that Science was philosophy of a particular sort, i.e. Natural Philosophy, which is what Science continued to be called almost until the end of the 19th century. Just as there are more kinds of animals than mammals, there have been, since the beginnings of philosophy, more areas of philosophy than natural philosophy. Moral philosophy, Logic, Social Philosophy and Metaphysics are the main ones. In the classical conception of Philosophy, it was assumed that one of the main responsibilities of philosophers was to explain how all of the various branches of Philosophy were interconnected, for example, how natural philosophy is connected with Moral philosophy.

Since the latter part of the 19th century, natural science has evolved to a position of autonomy and independence from Philosophy. The same thing happened to Mathematics, almost two thousand years earlier. Science is no longer considered to be an integral part of Philosophy. Indeed, many of the topics that once were considered parts of moral and social philosophy are now investigated by disciplines like Psychology, Anthropology, Linguistics, and Computer Science. These disciplines, too, now claim independence from their historical parent, Philosophy.

The growth of knowledge and the consequent need to limit one's focus, to specialize, is one part of the reason why these special disciplines have moved away

from philosophy, but this is not the only reason. It is because of the tremendous success of its *experimental methodology* that modern science has been able to take on an identity of its own. It is widely believed that the key difference between Philosophy and Science is that scientists' beliefs, thinking and theories are entirely guided by the methods and results of experimentation. Philosophers, whatever else they may do, don't conduct experiments. In some ways, this is a crude, simplistic, even naive conception of Philosophy but it is not completely off the mark. The key question is, what is it that philosophers do, now that they don't do science?

To begin, it ought to be recalled that the concept of *experimentation* and of the pursuit of knowledge by means of an experimental method of investigating Nature is a concept with a history. It is a concept that was developed and refined, mostly during the period from 1500 A. D. to about 1850 A. D. and it continues to be refined up to the present time. It is also a concept that once had to be defended against many powerful and sophisticated critics. This struggle went on for hundreds of years. Arguments had to be and were made over what sort of procedure was to be counted as an experiment. Now, once the *concept* of an experimental investigation was sufficiently well constructed, one could have arguments over what kinds of experiments to conduct in order to investigate some phenomenon and one could have arguments over what conclusions could be drawn from the results of an experiment and one could propose experiments for the purpose of settling all sorts of questions about Nature.

What one could not do, then or now, is to devise an experiment to determine *what an experiment is*. In other words, the arguments over what sort of procedure was to *count* as an experiment were not, and could not have been, settled by means of conducting some experiment. Only once the concept of an experiment has been sufficiently developed and justified, did modern empirical science become possible at all. So, issues about the *meaning of the concept* of experimental method are not issues to be dealt with by means of doing experiments. They are logically more fundamental than the actual business of empirical science itself.

They are issues about the *nature* of science itself rather than issues *within* science. Issues about the overall nature of some broad areas of human concern are philosophical issues. I will make use of this point in a few paragraphs hence.

This discussion shows that, not only did modern science originate historically from philosophy, it was because of the outcome of certain philosophical debates (during early modern history) that modern science was able to emerge with an identity of its own and become independent of its parentage. An essential part of this process

was in philosophy's taking on the role of showing how one of its parts could attain independence.

The point of this digression was to provide an explanation of what a philosophical question is. We now have at least one way of making an attempt at defining "philosophical question". Philosophical questions are questions about the meaning of *extremely* general concepts. Concepts are extremely general either when thinking within some broad area of human concern, like modern science, is impossible without them or when thinking of the most ordinary sorts, not tied to any specific area of human concern, would be impossible without them. In the one case, philosophical questions are questions in the philosophy of X, e.g., philosophy of science, philosophy of art, philosophy of religion or philosophy of language. In the other case, philosophical questions are questions of general philosophy, questions not tied to any specific area of interest, concern or endeavor. Scientist, Artist, Religious seeker, Politician, or uneducated ordinary person all must think sometime about questions of right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, death and the significance of human existence, and about Being and Reality. We must all think at least sometimes about these things simply because we are human and have enough intelligence to try to think about ourselves and our situation as human beings. Philosophy, in this more general sense of the word, existed before science became independent of it and continues to exist to this very day.

Now that I have made some attempt at defining Philosophy, I think we have (in (3) above) at least a working definition of Metaphysics. It does provide us with some preliminary sense of the generality that characterizes metaphysics, but not science. Yet (3) is still not good enough and for a very important reason.

We had to do some work to clear up the key term "philosophical". But (3) also contains at least one other key term, "the world". What does that mean? Well, in philosophy, it doesn't mean what it means when we say something like

Jones flew his plane completely around the world

because in that statement, "the world" refers to the Earth. The Earth is only one of many things and it is studied by Geologists, Physicists, and other scientists. Philosophers, in spite of this fact, constantly refer to "the World" and they mean by this term something much more than just the Earth. Philosophers also sometimes use the term "the universe" instead of "the world", especially when they are doing metaphysics. Here, again, though, this is obviously philosophers' careless habit of speech. A certain branch of physics known as cosmology attempts to construct

scientific theories about the origin and destiny of the universe as a whole. But cosmology is an empirical science. Like other empirical sciences, it relies on experimental methods, some of its most important recent experiments have concerned the background radiant energy apparently still present throughout space from some cosmic explosion, now referred to by scientists as the "big bang".

What philosophers really mean when they talk about "the world" is *the totality of all that exists*. How is that not the same as the universe? It could be taken to be the same as the universe if it could be assumed that what scientific cosmology studies, i.e., *the objects and forces of nature*, are the totality of all that exists. But philosophy is not entitled to as many assumptions as science is. Indeed, careful scientists assure us that, in their scientific business, they do not assert the philosophical claim that the totality of objects and forces of nature is the totality of all that exists. It is just that they restrict their study to natural objects because science cannot completely do without something to observe and experiment on. It would take some philosophical argument to support the claim that natural objects and forces are the totality of all that exists.

As a scientist, one need not take any position on that issue. If a scientist does take a position, then he has put on the philosopher's hat rather than the scientist's. In fact, scientists often do make philosophical claims or indulge in philosophical speculation, but when they do, they don't always warn their readers or audiences that that is what they are then doing.

One more phrase in (3) needs some comment: "general nature and structure". Scientists talk about the natures of many sorts of things and they talk about many different sorts of structures. The natures of radioactivity, of heat, of water, of supernovas, of earthquakes, and so on. They talk about structures: physical structures like tectonic plates, cells, crystals, galaxies, and many others. Some scientists even talk about social structures like the family or psychological structures like the human perceptual system. Now, if metaphysics is a part of philosophy and it is not an empirical science, what sorts of structures could it be concerned with? And what does it mean to study the general nature of Reality rather than the particular natures of specific kinds of things? Constructing an answer to these questions requires that we go back to the concepts of Possibility, Necessity, Existence, Being and Reality.

When a philosopher tries to establish what is the most general structure of Reality or of the totality of all that exists, she is not looking for structures like cells, crystals, or families. She is looking for structure in the sense of fundamental

components, but not in the sense that cells are fundamental to organisms or in the sense that families are fundamental to societies. These last two are not components of an extremely general or fundamental kind. *The kinds of basic components of reality (metaphysical structure) that the philosopher tries to establish are those without which no sort of totality of existence would be possible and without which the totality of actually existing things could not exist at all.*

Try the following analogy. Scientific cosmologists are puzzled, at present, as to why the stellar and galactic structures they observe have not drifted apart long ago and how they ever got organized in the first place. Many believe there isn't enough actually observed matter to exert the gravitational attraction that would account for this state of affairs. So, many scientists suspect that there is a kind of matter that it is extremely difficult to observe and it may constitute most of the matter in the Universe. They call this hypothetical stuff "dark matter". Without something like this, they suspect, galaxies and superclusters of galaxies would not be possible.

But dark matter would not necessarily be a metaphysically fundamental component of Reality. Or, at least, it would take some philosophical argument to establish this status for dark matter. Philosophers want to know

1) what kinds of things there must be in order that any sort of world can exist at all and

2) what kinds of things would, if they existed, make the most rational sense out of all the kinds of things that we seem to know exist, even if establishing their existence required us to give up believing in the existence of some of the things we now believe in.

Metaphysics aims at a comprehensive picture of the world, not just in the sense of making a complete *list* of what there is in it but in the sense of a picture which makes sense when seen as a whole because we see how all the elements of the picture contribute to the understandability of the whole. In a 1962 publication, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man", an American philosopher named Wilfrid Sellars said

"The aim of Philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term. Under 'things in the broadest possible sense' I include such radically different items as not only cabbages and kings, but numbers and duties, possibilities and finger snaps, aesthetic experience and death. To achieve success

in Philosophy would be to know one's way around with respect to all these things, not in that unreflective way in which the centipede of the story know its way around before it faced the question, "how do I walk?" but in that reflective way which means no intellectual hold are barred."

I have made a number of contrasts and comparisons between Science and Metaphysics. In a very important way, the interplay between science and metaphysics goes back almost to the very beginnings of philosophy. It could even be said that Metaphysics originated from a critique of the very earliest attempts at scientific thinking in ancient Greece, some 3000 years ago. This critique was made by a man named Parmenides. It was he who first paid logically exacting attention to the notions of Being, Existence, and Reality. The power of Parmenides' thinking on this subject was so great that it is hard to exaggerate its effects on the rest of the history of philosophy.

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