

THE NATURE OF METAPHYSICS

Philosophers are happy to discuss morality, social principles, and the basics of science, the mind, and knowledge, but when things become even more abstract and general they sometimes lose their nerve. The meanings of words become vaguer, language is stretched to its limit, and it is less clear what exactly is being referred to. We are in the world of metaphysics – the most basic principles and concepts of our thought and understanding. Philosophy is reasonably secure when it connects to simple reasoning or to sense experience, but when we move to ‘speculation’ it might be time to give up. Perhaps such apparent truths are unknowable, or even completely meaningless.

Undeterred, most great philosophers have plunged into this very abstract world, and there is a reasonable consensus about the features, concepts and problems that are found there. A few questions look hopeless to all but the bravest. What exactly is ‘existence’? Why does anything exist? Why is it the way it is? Could it have been different? But with a few assumptions, we can get started. Assume reality contains no contradictions, that some truths exclude other truths, that some things have to be true, and that (apart from the hopeless questions) everything has an explanation. We can also assume that there are ‘objects’, which have ‘properties’, that things resemble other things (or are indistinguishable from them). We then start to build a picture, of what objects and properties there are, and what distinguishes them. Because of the resemblances, we can categorise them. As large patterns appear we can formulate rules about what is going on. In this way, there seems to be the enticing prospect of building metaphysics ‘systems’ – big pictures, into which the finer details of philosophy can be neatly slotted. The great landmarks in the history of philosophy are the metaphysical systems that famous thinkers have constructed, some boldly reaching into the heart of things, others very cautiously reaching out with language and logic to see how far we can get.

A few key issues are the source of recurrent disputes. Should we take reality to be entirely physical, and reduce all the other more abstract phenomena to what the physicists describe? Is there a genuinely supernatural realm, and (if so) can we know it? Is the world of the mind different in kind from the physical world? Do the ideas, principles, concepts and laws on which the physical world seems to be founded belong to a different order of existence from the physical? Indeed, is there more than one way to ‘exist’? If we claim that everything reduces to material substances, what are we to make of the space in which they are located, and the times through which they endure? Sceptics about metaphysics say that only scientists can make progress with such questions. It is common, however, for scientists, when issues become very basic and general, to say that they will leave such matters to the philosopher.

So far it sounds as if the task of metaphysics is to describe reality, or describe the way we think about it. A rival view says we should improve our thinking about the world. Many metaphysicians connect their activities with those of the sciences, and aim to produce a very general scheme of thought, with accurate concepts and basic principles, on which the scientists can build good theories. A few thinkers go further, and propose that only by steeping themselves in the detailed findings of the sciences (and especially of fundamental physics) can any well-founded metaphysics be developed, with philosophers contributing an overview of the matter. An influential approach at the more philosophical level is to reduce our metaphysics to the barest minimum that will do the job for science, perhaps focusing on nothing more than the objects and how they are arranged. Others say that metaphysics is quite separate from science, and can make use of concepts like essences, strict definitions, formal logics, necessities, hypothetical facts, theories of meaning, relations of part and whole, and commitments about truth, thus keeping the subject separate from physics.

A very influential idea in recent metaphysics has been the discovery of techniques whereby any theory expressed in language can be converted, via a numbering system, and hence expressed mathematically. This means that the powerful and precise techniques of assessment used in mathematics can be brought to bear on metaphysics, provided the proposed theories are precise enough. This has moved one area of metaphysics out of the reach of the ordinary student, and into the esoteric world of mathematical or modal logic. It is then difficult to assess how such findings relate to the more approachable and traditional works of metaphysics.

The opponents of metaphysics fall roughly into three camps, all of them sharing the view that metaphysics is too remote from experience to be plausible. The earliest claim was that truths must in some way be traceable back to experience, and that that connection was lost. The second was that language itself was only meaningful if it connected to experience, making metaphysics a vacuous subject. The third was that the theories of scientists always take priority over those of metaphysics, and so the latter has no authority at all.

For the optimists there are certain issues beyond science that seem obviously worth discussing. Physics cheerfully talks of the ‘properties’ of things, but are properties actually causal powers, or mere resemblances, or individual items? Science doesn’t bother much about (or takes for granted) ‘causation’, but there are obvious controversies about what this term really means. Science treats objects (such as planets) as being the same even when they undergo serious change, but how should we understand identity, similarity, and fundamental change?

Central to debates about the virtues and vices of metaphysics is the question of categorisation. Science focuses on ‘natural kinds’ – aspects of reality such as particles, elements and species, which are taken to have a stable identity, but this concept is full of metaphysical problems. We can categorise things any way we like, and yet nature seems to have ‘joints’, self-evident divisions that invite certain ways of categorising. Can philosophers address this matter directly, rather than leaving it to the various sciences?

The great metaphysical revisions of the past (achieved by ‘pure’ thought) seem to have receded, and modern metaphysics was reduced simply to ‘ontology’ (an account of what exists), but more recently it is the structure of what exists that has become interesting. How do some things depend on others, how do explanations work, and what sorts of determination relations give rise to the structures? Most thinkers nowadays are optimistic that these enquiries are worth pursuing.