

Metaphysics

A contemporary introduction

Third edition

Michael J. Loux

Introduction

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Overview

Philosophers have disagreed about the nature of metaphysics. Aristotle and the medievals give us two different accounts of the discipline. Sometimes, they characterize it as the attempt to identify the first causes, in particular, God or the Unmoved Mover; sometimes, as the very general science of being *qua* being. They believed, however, that these two characterizations identify one and the same discipline. The rationalists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by contrast, expanded the scope of metaphysics. They took it to be concerned not merely with the existence and nature of God, but also with the distinction between mind and body, the immortality of the soul, and freedom of the will.

The empiricists and Kant were critical of both Aristotelian and rationalist conceptions of metaphysics, arguing that they seek to transcend the limits of human knowledge; but even Kant thought that there can be a legitimate kind of metaphysical knowledge. Its aim is to delineate the most general structures at work in our thought about the world. This Kantian conception of metaphysics continues to enjoy popularity among contemporary philosophers, who insist that metaphysics has as its aim the characterization of our conceptual scheme or conceptual framework. These philosophers typically agree with Kant that the structure of the world as it is in itself is inaccessible to us and that metaphysicians must be content to describe the structure of our thinking about that world.

The case for this Kantian conception of metaphysics is not, however, particularly impressive; for if there are problems with characterizing the world as it is, there ought to be similar problems with characterizing our thought about the world. But if we agree that Aristotelian or rationalist metaphysics is not doomed from the start, we must concede that the two conceptions suggest very different topics for a text in metaphysics. In this book, we will follow the Aristotelian characterization of metaphysics as a discipline concerned with being *qua* being. That characterization gives rise to the attempt to identify the most general kinds or categories under which things fall and to delineate the relations that hold among those categories.

The nature of metaphysics – some historical reflections

It is not easy to say what metaphysics is. If one looks to works in metaphysics, one finds quite different characterizations of the discipline. Sometimes these characterizations seek to be descriptive, to provide us with an account of what philosophers who have been called metaphysicians do. Sometimes, they are normative; they represent attempts to identify what philosophers ought to be doing when they do metaphysics. But descriptive or normative, these characterizations give such different accounts of the subject matter and methodology appropriate to metaphysics that the neutral observer is likely to think that they must be characterizing different disciplines. Disagreement about the nature of metaphysics is certainly tied to its long history. Philosophers have been doing or trying to do something they have called metaphysics for more than 2,000 years; and the results of their efforts have been accounts with a wide variety of subject matters and approaches. But the difficulty of identifying a unique subject matter and methodology for metaphysics is not simply traceable to the long history of the discipline. Even in its origins, there is ambiguity about just what metaphysics is supposed to be.

The term 'metaphysics' as the name of the discipline is taken from the title of one of Aristotle's treatises. Aristotle himself never called the treatise by that name; the name was conferred by later thinkers. Aristotle called the discipline at work in the treatise *first philosophy* or *theology* and the knowledge that is the aim of the discipline, *wisdom*. Nonetheless, the subsequent use of the title *Metaphysics* makes it reasonable to suppose that what we call metaphysics is the sort of thing done in that treatise. Unfortunately, Aristotle does not give us a single account of what he is up to there. In some contexts, he tells us that what he is after in the treatise is a knowledge of *first causes*.¹ This suggests that metaphysics is one of the departmental disciplines, a discipline with a subject matter distinct from that considered by any other discipline. What subject matter is identified by the expression 'first causes'? Perhaps, a number of different things; but central here is God or the Unmoved Mover. So what subsequently came to be called metaphysics is a discipline concerned with God, and Aristotle tells us a good bit about the discipline. He tells us that it is a theoretical discipline. Unlike the various arts that are concerned with production and the various practical sciences (ethics, economics, and politics) whose end is the direction of human action, metaphysics has as its goal the apprehension of truth for its own sake. In this respect, it agrees with the mathematical sciences and the various physical sciences. The former take quantities as their subject matter (discrete quantities in the case of arithmetic and continuous quantities in the case of geometry), and the latter are concerned with the nature and structure of the material or physical substances (both living and nonliving) that make up the natural world. Metaphysics, by contrast, has immaterial substance as its subject matter.² And the relationship between the discipline and its subject matter gives metaphysics an intriguing status. Unlike the other disciplines, it does not simply assume the existence of

its subject matter; it must actually prove that there is an immaterial substance for it to be about. So the project of proving that there is an Unmoved Mover outside the world of nature is a part of metaphysics itself; but since Aristotle thinks that we have a distinctive discipline only where we have a distinctive subject matter, he is committed to the idea that metaphysicians can be sure that there is a discipline for them to engage in only if they succeed in carrying out one of the projects on the agenda of the discipline.

But Aristotle is not satisfied to describe metaphysics as the investigation of first causes. He also tells us that it is the science that studies being *qua* being.³ As this characterization gets fleshed out, metaphysics turns out to be not another departmental discipline with a special subject matter of its own. It is rather a universal science, one that considers all the objects that there are. On this characterization, then, metaphysics examines the items that constitute the subject matter for the other sciences. What is distinctive about metaphysics is the *way* in which it examines those objects; it examines them from a particular perspective, from the perspective of their being beings or things that exist. So metaphysics considers things as beings or as existents and attempts to specify the properties or features they exhibit just insofar as they are beings or existents. Accordingly, it seeks to understand not merely the concept of being, but also very general concepts like unity or identity, difference, similarity, and dissimilarity that apply to everything that there is. And central to metaphysics understood as a universal science is the delineation of what Aristotle calls *categories*. These are the highest or most general kinds under which things fall. What the metaphysician is supposed to do is to identify those highest kinds, to specify the features peculiar to each category, and to identify the relations that tie the different categories together; and by doing this, the metaphysician supposedly provides us with a map of the structure of all that there is.

So we meet with two different accounts of what metaphysics is in Aristotle. On the one hand, there is the idea of a departmental discipline concerned to identify the first causes – in particular, God; and, on the other, there is the idea of a universal or perfectly general discipline whose task it is to consider things from the perspective of their being beings or existents and to provide a general characterization of the whole realm of being. At first glance, there appears to be a tension between these two conceptions of metaphysics. It is difficult to understand how a single discipline can be both departmental and universal. Aristotle is himself aware of the appearance of tension here, and takes pains to show that the tension is only apparent.⁴ On the one hand, he suggests that a science of first causes will identify the causes underlying the primary features of things, those features that are presupposed by any other features they may exhibit; and he seems prepared to say that since the being or existence of a thing is primary in this way, the science that studies first causes will just be the science that investigates being *qua* being. On the other, he seems to hold that any discipline that examines everything insofar as it is a being will number God among the items it seeks to characterize.

In the medieval Aristotelian tradition, we continue to meet with this dual characterization of metaphysics; and like Aristotle, the medievals believed that the two conceptions of metaphysics are realized in a single discipline, one that aims both to delineate the categorial structure of reality and to establish the existence and nature of the Divine Substance. But when we reach the metaphysical writings of the Continental rationalists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we meet with a conception of metaphysics that expands the scope of the metaphysical enterprise. Although they rejected many of the details of Aristotle's metaphysical theory, they agreed that the point of doing metaphysics is to identify and characterize the most general kinds of things there are, and they agreed that a reference to the Divine Substance and His causal role is a central part of this task. Nonetheless, topics that do not figure as items on the Aristotelian metaphysical agenda came to be viewed as proper objects of metaphysical inquiry. For Aristotle, the examination of changeable physical objects, the delineation of the gap between living and nonliving things, and the identification of what is unique to human beings are all to be carried out within the context of natural or physical science rather than metaphysics. But the rationalists, confronted with an intellectual landscape where Aristotelian physics is displaced by the more mathematical and experimental account of the new physics, thought of these issues as metaphysical. As they saw things, metaphysics was concerned not simply with the existence and nature of God, but with the distinction between mind and body, their relationship in human beings, and the nature and extent of freedom of the will.

Someone schooled in the Aristotelian tradition would be puzzled by this new use of the term 'metaphysics' and would likely charge that, in the hands of the rationalists, what is supposed to be a single discipline with a single subject matter turns out to be the examination of a hodgepodge of unrelated topics. Evidently, rationalists were sensitive to this sort of charge, and they sought to provide a rationale for their redrawing of disciplinary boundaries within philosophy. What ultimately emerged is a general map of the metaphysical terrain.⁵ The claim was that there is a single subject matter for metaphysics; it is being. So the metaphysician seeks to provide an account of the nature of being; but there is a variety of different perspectives from which one can provide such an account, and corresponding to these different perspectives are different subdisciplines within metaphysics. First, one can examine being from the perspective of its being just that – being. Since this represents the most general perspective from which one can consider being, the branch of metaphysics that considers being from this perspective was dubbed *general metaphysics*. But the rationalists insisted that we can also examine being from a variety of more specialized perspectives. When we do, we are pursuing this or that branch of what the rationalists called *special metaphysics*. Thus, we can consider being as it is found in changeable things; we can, that is, consider being from the perspective of its being changeable. To do so is to engage in *cosmology*. We can, as well, consider being as it is found in rational

beings like ourselves. To consider being from this perspective is to pursue that branch of special metaphysics the rationalists called *rational psychology*. Finally, we can examine being as it is exhibited in the Divine case, and to examine being in this light is to engage in *natural theology*. Pretty clearly, the rationalist notions of general metaphysics and natural theology correspond to the Aristotelian conceptions of metaphysics as a thoroughly universal science that studies being *qua* being and as a departmental discipline concerned with first causes; whereas the claim that metaphysics incorporates cosmology and rational psychology as branches expresses the new and broader scope associated with metaphysics in the rationalist scheme.

But it was not merely in its subject matter that rationalist metaphysics differed from Aristotle's. Aristotle's approach to metaphysical issues had been cautious. In his delineation of the categories he had sought to remain faithful to our prephilosophical conception of the world. As he had seen things, the fully real or metaphysically basic entities are the familiar objects of common sense – things like individual horses and individual human beings. And even in his account of God or the Unmoved Mover, he had been anxious to show the continuity between his philosophical account and our prephilosophical beliefs about the causal structure of the world. The result was a relatively conservative metaphysics. The metaphysical theories of the rationalists, by contrast, were anything but conservative. In their hands, metaphysics results in abstract speculative systems far removed from any recognizably commonsense picture of the world. Here, one has only to skim the works of a thinker like Spinoza or Leibniz to appreciate the extravagance of rationalist metaphysics.

The highly abstract and speculative nature of rationalist metaphysics made it a natural target for the criticisms of empiricist thinkers. The empiricists insisted that any claim to knowledge requires a justification by reference to sensory experience; and they argued that since no experience could ever justify the assertions making up rationalist metaphysical systems, the rationalist's claims to be providing scientific knowledge of the nature of reality were spurious.⁶ Indeed, the empiricists frequently made the stronger claim that the characteristic assertions of rationalist metaphysics were without meaning. The empiricists held that all of our conceptual representations are derived from the contents of sensory experience. Accordingly, they insisted that an assertion has genuine cognitive content or meaningfulness only if the terms it employs are susceptible of an analysis or explanation in terms of purely sensory contents. Since the claims of the rationalist metaphysicians did not pass this test, the empiricists concluded that they were mere sounds without sense.

In the work of Kant, we meet with further criticism of the metaphysical enterprise.⁷ In Kant's account, human knowledge involves the interplay of concepts innate to the human cognitive faculties and the raw data of sense experience. The sensory data are the effects on our subjective sense faculties of a world external to those faculties. The data get structured or organized by way of the innate concepts, and the result is an object of knowledge. So what

we call an object of knowledge is not a thing external to and independent of our cognitive machinery; it is the product of the application of innate conceptual structures to the subjective states of our sensory faculties. The world that produces those subjective states is something that, as it is in itself, is inaccessible to us; we grasp it only as it affects us, only as it appears to us. An object of knowledge, then, requires the sensory contents of the empiricists; but more is required. The contents must be unified and organized by conceptual structures that do not have their origin in sense experience. Kant, however, wants to insist that just as the sensory contents constitute an object of knowledge only when structured by the innate concepts, the innate conceptual structures yield an object of knowledge only when they are applied to the sensory contents for which they provide principles of unity and organization.

Now, as Kant saw it, metaphysics, whether of the rationalist or Aristotelian variety, represents the attempt to know what lies beyond the scope of human sensory experience. It seeks to answer questions for which sense experience is incapable of providing answers, questions about the immortality of the soul, the existence of God, and freedom of the will. It promises us knowledge about these matters. In the attempt to provide the promised knowledge, however, the metaphysician employs the conceptual structures that underlie less controversial forms of knowledge, structures like those at work in talk about substances, causation, and events. But since the relevant structures yield knowledge only when they are applied to the raw data of sensory experience, the philosopher's use of those structures to answer the perennial questions of metaphysics never delivers the knowledge the metaphysician promises us. Given the way our cognitive machinery operates, the conditions required for knowledge can never be satisfied in the metaphysical case. The claims the metaphysician wants to make go beyond the limits of human knowledge. Accordingly, there can never be genuinely scientific knowledge in metaphysics.

To bring out this feature of traditional metaphysics, Kant calls it *transcendent metaphysics*. He contrasts transcendent metaphysics with what he calls *critical metaphysics*. Critical metaphysics, he tells us, is a perfectly respectable, legitimate enterprise. Whereas transcendent metaphysics seeks to characterize a reality that transcends sense experience, critical metaphysics has as its task the delineation of the most general features of our thought and knowledge. It seeks to identify the most general concepts at work in our representation of the world, the relationships that obtain among those concepts, and the presuppositions of their objective employment. The project set by critical metaphysics is precisely the project Kant takes himself to be carrying out when he gives us his own account of the conditions for human knowledge.

Kant's conception of a metaphysical enterprise whose task it is to identify and characterize the most general features of our thought and experience is one that continues to find defenders in our own day.⁸ These philosophers tell us that metaphysics is a descriptive enterprise whose aim is the

characterization of our *conceptual scheme* or *conceptual framework*. As these philosophers see things, any thought or experience we might have involves the application of a single unified body of representations. That body of representations constitutes something like a picture of how things are; it is a kind of story we tell about the world and our place in it. The story has a distinctive structure: it is organized by way of very general concepts, and the use of those concepts is regulated by principles (often called 'framework principles'). The aim of metaphysics is simply to delineate that structure in its most general contours.

Philosophers who endorse this idea of a conceptual scheme or conceptual framework do not all agree on the status enjoyed by our picture of the world. Although they do not endorse the details of Kant's own account of human knowledge, some proponents of the idea of a conceptual scheme agree with Kant that there is a single unchanging structure that underlies anything that can be called human knowledge or experience. Others emphasize the dynamic and historical character of human thought, and they speak of alternative conceptual frameworks. They see great conceptual changes, such as the scientific revolution that saw Newtonian mechanics displaced by relativity theory, as cases where one conceptual scheme is rejected in favor of a new and different picture of the world. For thinkers of the former sort, metaphysics has a stable and unchanging subject matter: the single, uniquely human way of representing the world; for the latter, the task of metaphysics is comparative: it attempts to display the different forms at work in the alternative schemes that have historically played a role in our attempts at picturing the world.

Philosophers of both sorts stand squarely opposed to those who defend a more traditional, pre-Kantian conception of metaphysics. Philosophers who take the notion of a conceptual scheme seriously will take metaphysics to be concerned with our way or ways of representing the world. Whether they limit the subject matter of metaphysics to the items on the Aristotelian agenda or follow the rationalists in expanding the scope of metaphysics to include topics like the mind-body problem, the immortality of the soul, and freedom of the will, philosophers who view metaphysics in pre-Kantian terms take metaphysics to have as its task an account of the nature and structure of the world itself. An inquiry into the structure of human thought is, however, something quite different from an inquiry into the structure of the world thought is about. Of course, if one believes that the structure of our thought reflects or mirrors the structure of the world, then one might claim that the results of the two inquiries must be the same. But philosophers who are attracted by talk of conceptual schemes do not typically believe this. They claim that metaphysics has as its subject matter the structure of our conceptual scheme or schemes precisely because, like Kant, they think that the world as it really is is something that is inaccessible to us.

Why do they think this? Because they agree with Kant that our thought about the world is always mediated by the conceptual structures in terms of which we represent that world. As they see it, to think of anything external to

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my cognitive faculties, I must apply concepts that represent the thing as being some way or other, as belonging to some kind or as characterized in some way; but, then, what I grasp is not the object as it really is independently of my thought about it. What I grasp is the object as I conceptualize or represent it, so that the object of my thought is something that is, in part at least, the product of the conceptual or representational apparatus I bring to bear in doing the thinking. What I have is not the thing as it is in itself, but the thing as it figures in the story I tell of it or the picture I construct of it.

Now, some of those who invoke the idea of a conceptual framework (the conceptual schemers, we might call them) go further and claim that the very idea of an object separate from and independent of the conceptual scheme by which we form our representations is incoherent.⁹ On this radical view, all that there is is the conceptual framework or frameworks. There is nothing more than the stories we tell, the pictures we construct. What we call the existence of an object is simply a matter of something's figuring in a story; and what we call the truth of our beliefs is just a matter of the various components of a story fitting together or cohering with each other.

This more radical version of the conceptual scheme account is a version of what has been called *idealism*, and it is a view that is extremely difficult to articulate coherently. If we hold that there is nothing but the stories that human beings construct, then what are we to say of the human beings who are supposedly doing the constructing? If they are really there doing the constructing, then it is not the case that there is nothing but the stories that get constructed, and it is not the case that to exist is just to be a character in a story. If, on the other hand, we human beings are just further characters in the stories, then is it really the case that there are any stories that get told? Or is it just a further story that all these stories get constructed? And is this new story (the story that the original stories get told) itself just one more story?

As I have suggested, not all conceptual schemers endorse the more radical view we have been discussing; but even the schemer who concedes that the idea of an item that exists independently of a conceptual framework is coherent will deny that any such items as there may actually be can constitute the objects of metaphysical study. Any such items, they will insist, are grasped only by way of the conceptual structures we bring to bear in our representation of them. Those structures constitute a kind of screen that bars us from access to things as they really are. Accordingly, even the moderate conceptual schemer will deny that it is possible to do what the traditional metaphysician wants to do – to provide knowledge of the ultimate structure of reality; they will claim that if there is to be an enterprise with the generality, systematicity, and comprehensiveness philosophers have wanted to claim for metaphysics, that enterprise can consist in nothing more than the characterization of the most general structure of our conceptual scheme or schemes.

What will be the response of traditional metaphysicians to this neo-Kantian account? Most probably, they will argue that if the conceptual schemer is correct in denying that the world as it really is can be an object of

serious philosophical inquiry, then the schemer is wrong to suppose that a conceptual scheme can be. The central premise in the schemer's argument against traditional metaphysics is the claim that the application of conceptual structures in the representation of things bars us from genuine access to those things; but the defender of traditional metaphysics will point out that we need to employ concepts in our characterization of what the schemer calls a conceptual framework, and they will conclude that, by the schemer's own principles, that entails that there can be no such thing as characterizing the nature and structure of a conceptual scheme. So traditional metaphysicians will argue that if their conception of metaphysics is problematic, so is the schemer's. But traditional metaphysicians will insist that there is a deeper moral here. That moral is that there is something self-defeating in the conceptual schemer's account of conceptual representation. If the conceptual schemer is correct in claiming that the activity of conceptual representation bars us from an apprehension of anything we seek to represent, then why should we take seriously the schemer's claims about conceptual representation? Those claims, after all, are just further conceptual representations; but, then, so far from revealing the nature of the activity of conceptual representation, the claims would seem to preclude our getting a hold on what those claims are supposed to be about – the activity of conceptual representation.

Traditional metaphysicians will go on to insist that we manage to think and talk about things – things as they really are and not just things as they figure in the stories we tell. They will insist that the very idea of thinking about or referring to things presupposes that there are relations that tie our thoughts and words to the mind-independent, language-independent things we think and talk about; and they will insist that so far from barring us from access to things, the concepts we employ in our thinking are the vehicles for grasping the things to which they apply. They are not screens or barriers between us and things; they are, on the contrary, our routes to objects, our ways of gaining access to them. And traditional metaphysicians will argue that there is no reason to suppose that it needs to be otherwise with the concepts traditional metaphysicians employ in their attempts at giving us an account of what there is and its general structure. They will concede that metaphysicians can get things wrong, that there can be false metaphysical claims; but they will insist that the threat of falsehood is no more serious here than it is in any other discipline where we attempt to say how things are. It may be difficult to provide a true characterization of the nature of reality, but that does not mean that it is impossible.

Defenders of a Kantian conception of metaphysics will insist that the issues surrounding this debate are more complex and more difficult than the traditional metaphysician suggests; and although we may initially find ourselves sympathetic with the traditional metaphysician, we must concede that this debate over the methodology appropriate to metaphysics hinges on the much larger issue of the relationship between thought and the world. That issue strikes at the core of any characterization of being and, by any standards,

counts as metaphysical. It is, however, such an important issue that it cannot be resolved in the introductory paragraphs of a book on metaphysics. The characterization of the relationship of our thought or language and the world requires separate and extended treatment; and in this book, the concluding chapter will be devoted to that issue. There, we will examine in detail the challenge that philosophers of a Kantian persuasion – anti-Realists, as they are often called – present to the traditional account of the relationship between thought and the world. In the meantime, however, we need a conception of metaphysics to guide us; and the strategy will be to assume, tentatively, the traditional, pre-Kantian approach.

Metaphysics as category theory

The aim will be to characterize the nature of reality, to say how things are. As we have seen, different traditions associate different subject matters with this project. In the Aristotelian tradition, there is the idea of a science of first causes and the idea of a science that studies being *qua* being. Even if there is a single science answering to the two ideas, the ideas, initially at least, appear to be different. The idea of a general science that studies beings from the perspective of their being beings corresponds to what the rationalists called general metaphysics; and a central task suggested by the idea of a science of first causes corresponds to the task associated with that branch of special metaphysics the rationalists dubbed natural theology; and we have the two other branches of special metaphysics – cosmology which provides a characterization of the changeable, material world, and rational psychology which deals, among other things, with the mind-body problem and, presumably, the problem of free will.

Many introductory books on metaphysics accord with the rationalist chart of the discipline. Indeed, they make issues in what the rationalists called special metaphysics their focus. Thus, questions about the existence and nature of God, questions about the nature of human beings and the mind-body problem, and questions about freedom of the will occupy center stage. This is a perfectly appropriate strategy. Since the seventeenth century, these issues have all been dubbed metaphysical. A different strategy for constructing an introductory text in metaphysics is, however, equally defensible. This strategy limits the topics to be discussed roughly to those that fall under the rubric of Aristotle's science of being *qua* being or the rationalist's science of general metaphysics.

A number of considerations support this way of approaching metaphysics. Contemporary philosophers divide philosophy in ways that do not respect the disciplinary boundaries of the rationalist account. The topics that were central in the various branches of what the rationalists called special metaphysics are now discussed in subdisciplines of philosophy that are not essentially or exclusively concerned with metaphysical topics. The focus of natural theology, for example, was the existence and nature of God; that set of issues is

now typically addressed in what we call the philosophy of religion, a subdiscipline of philosophy that addresses a much broader range of issues than old-style natural theology. It deals with epistemological questions about the rationality of religious belief in general as well as the rationality of particular religious beliefs, questions about the relationship between religion and science, and questions about the relationship between religion and morality. Philosophers of religion even discuss issues that were part of what the rationalists called rational psychology – questions about personal survival and immortality. Other issues discussed in rational psychology now fall under what we call the philosophy of mind; but while philosophers of mind worry about metaphysical questions about the existence and nature of mind, they worry about much else besides. They raise epistemological questions about our knowledge of our own mental states and those of others; and they spend much time attempting to get clear on the nature of explanation in psychology and the cognitive sciences. Sometimes, we find philosophers of mind raising questions about freedom of the will, but this problem is as likely as not to be debated in a still different part of philosophy called the theory of action. Contemporary philosophers typically use the term 'metaphysics' to refer to a branch of philosophy different from each of these branches; and when they do, what they are talking about is something that is not far removed from what the rationalists called general metaphysics and what Aristotle spoke of as the science that studies being *qua* being.

So the way introductory texts in metaphysics are organized does not reflect the way philosophers today typically use the term 'metaphysics'. One consequence is that the issues that are central in what we nowadays call metaphysics are not much discussed in introductory fashion. And that is unfortunate since those issues are as fundamental as any philosophical issues. So there's one argument for an introductory metaphysics text that investigates being *qua* being; but there is another. The series of which this book is a part will have texts in the Philosophy of Religion and the Philosophy of Mind; topics like the existence and nature of God and the mind-body problem will be addressed in those volumes. The metaphysics volume should focus on different issues, and it will. It will focus on the issues that arise when we attempt to provide a general account of the structure of all that there is.

But what are those issues? In discussing Aristotle's conception of metaphysics as a perfectly general discipline, I said that a central aim of such a discipline is the identification and characterization of the categories under which things fall. It would not be far off the mark to say this is what metaphysics as it is understood these days aims at. But just what is it to identify the categories under which things fall? As I indicated earlier, Aristotle took the categories to be the highest or most general kinds under which things can be classified. This suggests that what metaphysicians do is to take all the things there are and sort them into the most general kinds under which they fall. According to Aristotle, the kinds under which a thing falls enable us to say what the thing is. It would seem, then, that if they are to

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identify the highest kinds, metaphysicians should seek out the most general answers to the "What is it?" question. One way it might seem they might do this is to take a familiar object like Socrates and pose the question "What is he?" The obvious answer is "A human being." But while 'human being' picks out a kind under which Socrates falls, there are more general answers to the question "What kind of thing is Socrates?" He is, after all, a primate, a mammal, a vertebrate, and an animal. To identify the category to which Socrates belongs is to identify the terminus or endpoint in this list of ever more general answers to the "What is it?" question. And when do we have that? The standard reply is that we arrive at the category of a thing when we arrive at an answer to the "What is it?" question such that the only more general answer is given by a term like 'entity,' 'being,' 'thing,' or 'existent' that applies to everything that there is. Aristotle thought that the relevant answer for Socrates is given by the term 'substance,' so Aristotle took substance to be the category under which Socrates and other living beings fall.

Now, it might seem that if our metaphysicians want to come up with the complete list of categories, they need only apply the kind of question-and-answer procedure they employed in the case of Socrates to other objects. Provided they choose their sample objects in a way that is sensitive to the differences among things, they will find themselves arriving at new and different categories. At some point, however, they will find that no new categories emerge. Repeating the procedure just brings them back to categories they have already isolated. At that point, they can be confident, subject to normal concerns about the adequacy of inductive procedures, that they have identified all the highest kinds or categories of being.

This is one way of thinking about categories and their role in the enterprise of metaphysics. It is, in fact, a way in which many philosophers view the whole business of identifying categories. Unfortunately, it has serious shortcomings as an account of what goes on in metaphysics. For one thing, it makes metaphysics a pretty boring business. Coming up with a table of categories is simply the mechanical procedure of finding the most general answers to the "What is it?" question; and it is difficult to understand how a procedure requiring as little imagination as that could have occupied the efforts of mankind's greatest minds for over 2,000 years. For another, the account makes it difficult to understand how there could be any interesting disagreements or disputes in metaphysics. On this view, if two metaphysicians give us different lists of categories, it can only be because at least one of them has made some pretty gross and palpable mistake: either he or she committed an inductive error, failing to apply the question-and-answer procedure to a proper sample of objects, or was confused about the way the classificatory terms in our language work. The fact is, however, that nothing is more common in metaphysics than debate and controversy; and the opponents in metaphysical debates are typically perceptive, clearminded thinkers, thinkers who are not likely to be guilty of gross intellectual failings.

But the difficulties with this understanding of categories and the nature of metaphysics run deeper. The picture assumes that metaphysicians begin their work confronted with a totality of objects that is nonproblematically given and that their job is to find niches in which to place the objects in that totality. The fact is, however, that philosophers who disagree about categories disagree about what objects there are. There is no antecedently given set of objects about which all metaphysicians agree. Disputes in metaphysics are typically disputes about how one is to answer the question "What objects are there?" and to provide alternative lists of categories is just to provide different answers to this question.

A simple example enables us to understand the nature of metaphysical disputes. Consider somersaults. 'Somersault' is a term that most of us who speak English know how to use; we all apply it in roughly the same situations and we withhold it in roughly the same situations; and we use it to express beliefs most of us share, beliefs about what somersaults are, beliefs about when one has occurred, beliefs about when one was done well, and so on. Now, we can imagine two philosophers reacting to these facts about the term 'somersault' in very different ways. One tells us that there are such things as somersaults. He/she tells us that a somersault is simply a complete revolution of what is typically a human body, done either forwards or backwards, with the heels going over the head. He/she insists that since many such revolutions have occurred, there have been many somersaults, and claims that unless we suppose there are such things as somersaults, we will be unable to explain how claims like

- (1) George performed five somersaults between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. on Thursday

can be true. The other philosopher, however, disagrees. He/she denies that there are such things as somersaults. He/she concedes that people and some animals roll themselves over in the relevant way, but he/she denies that this implies the existence of a special class of entities, somersaults. He/she concedes as well that many claims like (1) are true; but, again, he/she denies that this implies the existence of a special type of entity. What makes (1) true, he/she insists, is simply that George turned himself over five times during the relevant time period.

What are our two philosophers disagreeing about? Certainly they are not disagreeing about how we use the term 'somersault' in our ordinary, prephilosophical talk about the world, nor are they disagreeing about the truth value of claims like (1). They are disagreeing about whether the relevant facts of ordinary usage and the truth of the relevant prephilosophical claims require us to recognize somersaults in our "official" philosophical story about the world and its workings; they are disagreeing about whether things like somersaults should enter into our "official" philosophical inventory of things that are. Such an "official" inventory is usually called an *ontology*. Using this term,

we can say that our two philosophers are disagreeing about whether our ontology should include somersaults. The dispute between them is a metaphysical dispute. It is not, however, the sort of dispute that is likely to occupy serious metaphysicians. It isn't that all metaphysicians think that our ontology must include somersaults; they do not. The reason metaphysicians would not concern themselves with argument about the status of somersaults is that the topic of somersaults is too specific, too local. The disagreement between our two philosophers is, however, easily generalized; and when it is, it becomes the sort of dispute metaphysicians do characteristically enter into. The philosopher who claims that we must recognize the existence of somersaults does not make that claim out of any special fondness for somersaults. Almost certainly, the claim is inspired by the philosopher's belief in the existence of things of a more general type. It is because he/she believes that events in general must enter into our ontology that he/she makes this claim for somersaults. In the same way, his/her opponent denies that there are such things as somersaults, not because he/she harbors a special prejudice against somersaults, but because he/she denies that our "official" story of the world should make reference to events. So the dispute over somersaults has its origin in a more general dispute. The more general dispute is a category dispute. The one philosopher believes that we should embrace the category of events; the other denies this.

To disagree about categories, then, is to disagree about what things exist; and many of the most central disputes in metaphysics are disputes of this sort. Although they operate at a more general level than the dispute over somersaults, they often display a certain structure. We have a dispute organized around a question about the existence of things of a very general type or category. Are there properties? Are there relations? Are there events? Are there substances? Are there propositions? Are there states of affairs? Are there possible worlds? In each case, there is a body of prephilosophical facts that function as data for the dispute. One party to the dispute insists that to explain the relevant prephilosophical facts, we must answer the existential question affirmatively. The other party claims that there is something philosophically problematic in the admission of entities of the relevant sort into our ontology, and argues that we can account for the prephilosophical facts without doing so.

Disputes over categories do not, however, always have precisely this form. We do not always find the parties to the dispute giving opposed answers to a question of the form "Are there C's?" (where 'C' is a category word). Sometimes we find them agreeing that there exist entities of this or that category; but, then, one party goes on and tells us that while there actually are entities corresponding to the category, they are all to be analyzed in terms of entities from some other category. Suppose the dispute centers on material objects. While both parties agree that there are material objects, one party tells us that material objects are to be analyzed as collections of sensory qualities. His/her opponent in the dispute is likely to respond by saying, "Look, you don't

really think that there are material objects. You just mouth the words. In your view, there really are no material objects; there are just sensory qualities." In reply, his/her opponent will doubtless object that he/she really does believe that there are material objects. "I am not denying that material objects exist; I am merely telling you what they are like." It is difficult to know how to resolve the argument about the term 'exists'; but however we resolve it, we must concede that there is deep metaphysical disagreement here, a disagreement that is, in some broad sense, existential. A way to express the disagreement is to say that while the one metaphysician wants to include material objects among the *primitive* or *basic* elements in her ontology, the other does not. The former denies that material objects can be analyzed in terms of or reduced to any more basic entities; the latter takes material objects to be mere constructions out of more fundamental entities. Although he/she says that there are material objects, when we look to the primitive items in his/her ontology (that is, the items in his or her ontology that are not reducible to entities of a more basic kind), we find no material objects, just sensory qualities. At rock bottom, then, there are no material objects in his/her ontology. In his/her metaphysical theory, material objects are not among the basic "building blocks" of reality. We can say that while material objects comprise a *primitive* or *underived* category in the ontology of the one philosopher, they constitute a *derived* category in that of the other.

So disputes over categories are disputes about the existence of entities of some very general kind or category. Sometimes the parties to the dispute disagree about the existence of entities of the relevant kind; sometimes they disagree about whether entities of the category are reducible to entities of some more basic category. Now, to provide a complete metaphysical theory is to provide a complete catalogue of the categories under which things fall and to identify the sorts of relations that obtain among those categories. The latter task will involve the identification of certain categories as basic and others as derived, and a specification of just how entities from the derived categories are to be reduced to or analyzed in terms of entities from the basic categories. A complete catalogue of this sort would represent a general account of all that there is. Aristotle believed that an account of this sort is the goal of the metaphysical enterprise. Not many metaphysicians today are prepared to offer this kind of complete theory of categories. The issues surrounding any one of the categories that have historically been the focus of metaphysical theorizing are so complex that contemporary metaphysicians are satisfied if they can work their way through just a handful of these sets of issues. In this book, we will follow their lead. We will not attempt anything so ambitious as a complete system of categories. We will focus on the issues that arise when one seeks to answer just a few of the category questions that arise in metaphysics. The questions we will consider are all very important, very fundamental questions, so examining them should give us a good sense of just what metaphysics is. Let us get on, then, with the questions; and let us begin with the set of questions that has been called the problem of universals.

Notes

- 1 See *Metaphysics* A.1 included in R. McKeon (1941).
- 2 See *Metaphysics* E.1 in McKeon (1941).
- 3 See *Metaphysics* Γ.1 in McKeon (1941).
- 4 See, especially, *Metaphysics* E.1 in McKeon (1941).
- 5 For a discussion of this map, see the entry on Christian Wolff in Edwards (1967).
- 6 For the classical empiricist attack on metaphysics, see Hume (1739). A more modern form of the attack is found in Ayer (1936).
- 7 See Kant (1787), especially the preface to the second edition and the "Transcendental Dialectic."
- 8 For examples of this approach to metaphysics, see Collingwood (1940), Körner (1974), Rescher (1973), Putnam (1981), and Putnam (1987). The claim that metaphysics has as its subject matter the description of our conceptual scheme is defended in the introduction to Strawson (1959); but while the language is neo-Kantian, much of what Strawson does in *Individuals* embodies an Aristotelian approach to the discipline.
- 9 See, for example, Rorty (1979).

Further reading

The literature on the nature of metaphysics is vast. The beginning student should look, first, to Aristotle, especially the first two chapters of *Metaphysics* A (i.e., Book I), the first two chapters of *Metaphysics* Γ (i.e., Book IV), and the first chapter of *Metaphysics* E (i.e., Book VI). Then, I would recommend a look at the criticisms of metaphysics in Kant (1787), especially the preface to the second edition, and in the opening sections of Ayer (1936). For recent discussions, the student should look at Körner (1974) and the introduction to Strawson (1959).