GENERAL INTRODUCTION

What is metaphysics?

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In 1869 the British architect and writer James Knowles, together with the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, founded a new society whose purpose was to bring together clergy, scientists, and other intellectuals, to explore the relationship between science and religion (relations between which being then somewhat fraught), in their attempt to explain the cosmos and our role in it. Meetings were held in London, and the society's members during the ten or so years of its existence included the biologist Thomas Henry Huxley, the philosophers Henry Sidgwick and James Martineau, the head of the English Roman Catholic Church, Cardinal Manning, the art critic John Ruskin, and the Prime Minister W. E. Gladstone. It was called the Metaphysical Society. It came to an end in 1880 because, in Tennyson's view, "after ten years of strenuous effort no one had succeeded in even defining the term 'Metaphysics'" (quoted in Tennyson 1899: 559).

To attempt a task that apparently defeated some of the greatest minds of the Victorian age might seem foolhardy, even arrogant, but in an introduction to a volume calling itself a Companion to Metaphysics, the attempt cannot be avoided. What follows does not pretend to be comprehensive, or detailed: it does no more than to sketch, in very general terms, some of the features that characterise the Western analytical tradition in metaphysics, the tradition in which most of the contributions to this volume are situated.

Many disciplines can be captured by their distinctive subject matter: geology, for instance, is the study of the earth, its physical structure and composition and the processes that shape these. But, as A. J. Ayer once observed, philosophy seems to have no special subject matter (Ayer 1973: 1). And the same is true of metaphysics. Metaphysics is sometimes described as the study of reality, but the sciences also study (parts of) reality, so what is distinctive about metaphysics? One way of distinguishing metaphysics from science is by pointing to the level of generality in metaphysical discussion. Physics, for instance, concerns itself with particular processes, laws and entities: the conversion of one energy form into another, the laws of motion or thermodynamics, protons, neutrons and quarks. Metaphysics operates at a higher level of abstraction, and looks at those features the particular processes or entities might have in common: causal connection, taking place or existing in space and time, or being composed of matter. This distinction is not as sharp as one might suppose, however,

since physics too has to deal in abstractions, and cosmology, for instance, is concerned with the nature of space and time themselves, and not just what takes place in them.

Metaphysics is also interested, as physics is not, by *what it is* to be real. Is there anything informative we can say about the distinction between what is real, or existent, and what is not? Are there general principles that govern the whole of reality (for instance, that everything that exists must have a cause of its existence)? Having reached a view on what it is to be real – perhaps that the character of reality is (unlike fiction) independent of our beliefs – we may be in a better position to say what is real: that is, to catalogue, in the most abstract terms, those things that are real. Our list may include such familiar entities as persons and material objects, but it may also include items very different from these, such as numbers. The part of metaphysics that is concerned with what exists is known as *ontology* (see Introduction to Part II). We might wonder whether there could be anything to metaphysics other than ontology, and indeed ontology does seem to be a large part of the metaphysical enterprise. But metaphysics is concerned not just with *what is*, but also with the *way* that it is. Objects do not merely exist: they have certain features. A building may be octagonal, a leaf brown, a bird in motion, and so on. Simply to list the things that are (even where "things" is used in its widest sense) does not capture the way things are. Of course, recognising that things have features may itself lead us to expand our ontology to include *properties* as well as the things that have those properties. And we may have to allow not only the individual property instances but also what is common to those instances, the property types. Does this show that saying how things are just amounts, after all, to saying what there is? No, because listing all the objects and properties that exist is consistent with any number of different allocations of those properties to those objects. So something has to be said about what relates a property to an object, by virtue of which the object can truly be said to have that property.

Two other cases appear to indicate that saying how things are does not reduce to saying what things there are (even though it may involve it). The first case concerns identity through time. One of the more interesting facts about persons, our common sense tells us, is that they have the capacity to go on existing, to *persist* through various kinds of change. It is one thing to understand that, and how, something exists; it is another to understand what it is for that same something to continue to exist, and to have existed in the past. To characterise persistence is not just to say what does, did and will exist: it is to say what relates those three.

The second case concerns contingency and necessity. You need not have been reading this page just now. You could, instead, have been going for a walk, or doing some shopping. Indeed, allowing our imaginations a little more freedom, your whole life might have been different: instead of studying philosophy (let us suppose, not unrealistically, that that is the actual state of affairs), you could have trained as an astronaut, and been about to set off on a journey to Mars. Why not? There is nothing absurd in such an idea. So the fact you are doing what you are doing right now is a purely contingent matter: it could have been otherwise. But there are other properties you have that we might be more reluctant to suppose you possess only contingently. Is it merely contingent, for instance, that you belong to the species *Homo sapiens*? Or (if you have no difficulty imagining yourself as a giant beetle) is it merely contingent that

you occupy space? Could you have been a number? There does seem to be a limit to the possibilities. If so, then there are certain properties that you have not merely contingently but of necessity. If this distinction is legitimate, then we can recognise what we might call a second-order way of being. There is a way things are, and there is a way *that that way* is. Some ways things are appear to be contingent; other ways things are appear to be necessary.

None of this is beyond dispute. It may be disputed, for instance, that contingency and necessity apply to reality itself, rather than to our descriptions of reality. One could imagine someone arguing as follows: "If I say 'all white swans are white', I have said something necessarily true, but I do not appear to have identified some necessity in the world. What I have said is true even if there are no white swans, or if white swans turn from time to time into black swans. Any actual state of affairs is consistent with my statement. This is a rather obvious case in which the necessity attaches just to the statement, but in fact *all* apparent cases of necessity have their source in language rather than the world." This is certainly a plausible line of reasoning, but it faces two kinds of objection. First, it is not clear that all apparent cases of *de re* necessity (that is, necessity attaching to things themselves) can be construed as *de dicto* necessity (necessity attaching to sentences). Second, if we say that "all white swans are white" by virtue of the fact that "some white swans are not white" is self-contradictory, we assume that there are no true contradictions. But that there are no true contradictions could be a substantial fact about this world, not a trivial one. That is, it may be a *de re* necessity that ultimately explains the *de dicto* ones.

So far, then, we have characterised metaphysics as concerned with what it is to be or be real, with what things there are, with the way that they are, and with the connection between the way things are and what things there are. And all this is pursued at a higher level of abstraction than typifies any of the special sciences like physics, geology or chemistry. But this is to characterise metaphysics in terms of its subject matter, and that only provides half the story, for it still leaves room for very different conceptions of the ambitions and methods of metaphysics. What, in doing metaphysics, are we aiming to achieve, and how should we set about doing so?

In 1959, during the heyday of "ordinary language philosophy," P. F. Strawson published a book entitled *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. He begins by contrasting two approaches to metaphysics: the descriptive and the revisionary (Strawson 1959: 9). Descriptive metaphysics aims to describe how we actually conceptualise the world, often making explicit what is often implicit in our thinking. Revisionary metaphysics, by contrast, aims to discover how we should conceptualise the world: how the world truly is. Revisionary metaphysics, as the name implies, will often show the world to be quite different from the way we ordinarily think it to be. We may wonder whether descriptive metaphysics really counts as metaphysics at all, as opposed to a prelude to metaphysics, given that it concerns our mental mirror of reality rather than reality itself. It may, of course, be all that is available to us, if all that is presented to our minds is reality's image. But one reason to think that we can in principle move beyond description is that we may discover hitherto hidden contradictions in our ordinary thought, forcing us to revise our beliefs to some extent. This is often precisely how the

revisionary metaphysician will proceed. If a given model of reality is found to be self-contradictory, then it must be replaced by some other model, which of course will be subject to the very same test. Ultimately, we may hope to arrive at a model that is a more accurate description of reality than the one with which we started. (Again, however, this presupposes, what for some philosophers is a matter of controversy, that there can be no true contradictions: see Priest [1987].)

This brings us to methodological issues. Is the "ordeal by consistency test" the only weapon in the metaphysician's armoury? If so, we are left with no means of choosing between equally consistent models. What else might guide our choice at this point? Very often a viewpoint is described as "intuitive," the implication being that this is a merit. And equally, a "counterintuitive" result is supposed to indicate that something has gone wrong somewhere. But what is it that is informing this intuition? It is presumably guided by the conceptual scheme that descriptive metaphysics seeks to uncover. If, then, intuition is accorded any authority, revisionary metaphysics will still to some extent be answerable to descriptive metaphysics: even if revealed contradictions force us to revise our ordinary conceptions of the world, we are still urged to choose the consistent scheme that diverges least from whatever scheme descriptive metaphysics throws up. But the very drive towards revisionary metaphysics should make us suspicious of "intuition" as a source of metaphysical knowledge.

Another constraint on our choice of model might be an epistemological one. Some metaphysical theories make it mysterious how we could acquire knowledge of the kinds of entity, property or relation that those theories say exist. And this might reasonably be held to be a point against such theories. The theory that underlying an object's properties is some bare "substratum," or that mathematical statements are made true by abstract entities that have no location in space and time, has been subjected to just this kind of epistemological objection.

The methods I have mentioned so far – attending to internal consistency, compatibility with our original conceptual scheme, and epistemological consequences – are wholly or largely *a priori*, making no direct appeal to experience or experiment. And this is often how metaphysics is popularly conceived, as a wholly *a priori* enterprise, this being precisely what differentiates it from science. But in sharp contrast to this is a naturalistic metaphysics, which is informed by physical science. The naturalistic metaphysician may be less concerned with *a priori* structures than with the metaphysical picture of the world suggested by, for example, the special and general theories of relativity, quantum mechanics, or string theory. As we might put it, metaphysics tells us what is possible; science what is actual (see Lowe 1998: 22–7, for a more careful statement of this idea). This does not make metaphysics redundant, because the philosophical implications of scientific theories, concerning a principle like the identity of indiscernibles, for instance, may need to be made explicit, since the scientist's concern in putting forward these theories is not likely to be primarily philosophical. But a note of caution is in order. In drawing out the supposed consequences of these theories, how much are we revealing what is already there, deep within the scientist's picture of reality, and how much are we bringing independent metaphysical models or principles to the interpretation of that picture? And how much are scientists themselves making

metaphysical assumptions that need to be scrutinised before being incorporated into scientific theory?

References

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