



alt text

What is Metaphysics?

The word 'metaphysics' is a neologism; it is a word coined to describe an unnamed work by Aristotle. In that work, Aristotle engaged in what he calls 'first philosophy', which he also calls the 'science of being qua being'. While the discipline of metaphysics has changed over time, it is useful in answering

the question ‘what is metaphysics?’ to think about the project of first philosophy as Aristotle understands it. What is the science of first philosophy? What is the science of being qua being?

1. The Science of What Really Exists

Aristotle characterizes first philosophy as the most *general science*. One way of understanding this claim is that metaphysics is concerned with distinguishing what kinds of things exist from those that do not. Do numbers, non-physical entities, for instance exist? What about God? Or what about macroscopic entities, entities that are apparently composed of microscopic entities? Do these things, things like chairs, tables, and so on, exist in addition to the parts that compose them?

We will discuss properties later in this course, but it helps to clarify this way of construing Aristotle’s project by considering the *Categories*, a work in which he attempts to characterize a range of properties:

Categories	Aristotle's Term	Examples
Essence	"what-it-is"	human, horse, tree,
Quantity	How much	four-foot, five-foot, 7 pounds
Quality	What sort	pale, warm, cold, musical, literate
Relation	related to what	double, greater, owner, brother
Location	Where	in the Lyceum, in the marketplace
Time	When	yesterday, last year
Position	Being situated	lies, sits
Habit	Having, possession	is shod, is armed
Action	Doing	cuts, burns
Passion	Undergoing	is cut, is burned

Consider a horse. It might be easy to accept that the flesh and blood horse exists. So too you might accept that the flesh and blood exist. But what the color, location, behavior, and so on of the horse?

2. Being qua Being

As well as characterizing first philosophy as the most general science, Aristotle also construes it as the science that

investigates being as such. It is the science that attempts to answer the question 'what is being?'. Aristotle thinks that this question is the same as the question 'what it is for something, anything to be a being?'

What does this mean? Imagine that you are looking at a dolphin. You ask what the thing in front of you is. A biologist will tell you about that being insofar as it is an organism. They'll tell you about its peculiar behavior, its mating habits, and so on. A physicist looking at the same being will tell you about it not insofar as it is an organism, but insofar as it is physical being, a being that occupies space, is made of matter, has weight, and is governed by various physical laws. The physicist could approach the study of that dolphin in a similar way to their study of stones. A biologist of course has nothing to say about stones at all.

Flipper is a dolphin, an animal, and a physical thing. But he is also one more thing. He is a being. There is an incredibly diverse range of being. A stone is a being. Numbers, if they exist, are also beings. Likewise, if God exists, he or she is a being. Numbers and God are not, of course, physical entities. There's not much a physicist can say about what it is to be a number. But if numbers do exist, then one thing that dolphins, stones, God, and numbers have in common is that they are all beings. Metaphysics, first philosophy as Aristotle calls it, might be construed as the study of everything not insofar as it is a plant or an animal but simply insofar as it is a being. Metaphysics then attempts to answer the question 'what is

being?’ by determining what every existing thing has in common. These commonalities should explain why anything that is a being is a being. They also tell us what distinguishes the things that exist from those that do not exist.

3. The Fundamental Level

This last points to an alternative way of characterizing metaphysics: it is the study of the features that explain why things are beings. On this view, metaphysicians are not so much interested in what exists, but interested in which of the things that exist are fundamental—where this means that they explain why the non-fundamental beings exist. The ancient philosophy Thales, for instance, believes that water was fundamental, and he attempted to use water to explain the existence of everything that was not water.

4. Science and Metaphysics

As the name suggests, metaphysics has some affinity to physics. Aristotle wrote a different treatise, *The Physics*. The ‘meta’ indicates that the relevant editor taught that *The Metaphysics* should be read either in conjunction with or after the text *The Physics*. One tempting option is to think that the editor believes that metaphysical questions are raised and answered only after physics is complete.

The relationship in Aristotle’s mind is likely more sophisticated. Aristotle believes that the proper object of

physics is change and its attributes. Physics studies why and how objects are subject to change, studies the space within which change occurs, and also studies time, which Aristotle considers the measure of change. Aristotle thinks that if there were no non-changing beings, then physics would be the most general science. If what it is to be a being is to change, then physics as the science of changing beings and change would be the science of being qua being

But how do we know if everything is a changing being? Physics assumes that the natural world exist. It tries to explain change, but it is not part of the physicists job to prove that there really is change in the world. Aristotle thinks that there are a variety of questions we can ask about the objects of physics that cannot be answered by physics, most importantly, questions which seem to undermine the very existence of change itself. So, for instance, Aristotle is concerned with certain paradoxes of motion which suggest that the appearance of moving things is a mere illusion; you may think that there is walkings, cycling, and jumping, but you are suffering a hallucination. Many of the topics we will discuss in this course concern attempts to prove that the reality of those subjects that physics studies.