
UNIT 1 ETYMOLOGY, DEFINITION AND SCOPE

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

As a beginner for the course on “Metaphysics,” you may start considering it as the study of the ultimate causes and of the first and most universal of all principles (Being). Ultimate causes extend their influence to all the effects within a given sphere. Metaphysics considers the absolutely ultimate cause of all beings. It strives to identify that cause and know more about its nature and activity. In this Unit you will have to pay attention to:

- Etymology of Metaphysics
- Definition of Metaphysics
- Scope of Metaphysics

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The universe has always spurred humans to wonder. They have laboured continuously, seeking an explanation for the universe – an explanation that can be considered ultimate and universal or all-encompassing. In this effort, various schools of thought arose throughout the course of history, each offering one’s own explanation. Some identified the most radical basis of reality with one particular element intrinsic to it, such as matter, spirit, thought or motion; this would imply that everything in the universe is just an offshoot or derivative of that element. On the other hand, some maintained the existence of a transcendent Principle which made the universe without being part of it. Some thinkers proposed the existence of one origin of the universe, while others held that the universe came to be from two or more sources. These views are not purely speculative; on the contrary, they exert a deep influence on human psyche. It does make a difference for a human to believe that everything – including oneself – originated from inert matter and will go back to it, or to believe that one was created by God, who brought one’s being out of nothing. To regard human beings as beings subject to the whims of blind destiny, or absolute masters of their own existence, or as creatures capable of freely knowing and loving a personal God – all these are doctrinal options that mark out completely the divergent paths for human life. Initially, the study formed

only one undifferentiated body of knowledge called philosophy, wisdom or science. Soon after, however, studies of different aspects of reality (e.g., mathematics, medicine and grammar) gave rise to special or particular sciences, which became distinct from philosophy proper which dealt with the more fundamental questions about reality. In turn, as the body of philosophical knowledge grew, there appeared branches of philosophy dealing with specific objects of study, such as nature, human and morals. One discovers among these branches, a core of philosophical knowledge that influences all other branches, for it seeks the ultimate structure of the universe, which necessarily leads to the study of its first and radical cause. This science is called metaphysics.

1.2 ETYMOLOGY OF METAPHYSICS

In the West, Aristotle can be called the beginner of the science of *being as being* or metaphysics. But the name ‘metaphysics’ attributed to this science of ‘*being as being*’ is something accidental. It was Andronicus of Rhodes, around 60 AD, while editing the manuscripts of Aristotle, labeled the books which happened to be placed after Aristotle’s works on ‘physics’ as ‘*meta ta physika*,’ meaning ‘after physics’. Just as the Upanishads, being placed at the end of the Vedas, came to be called as Vedanta, metaphysics derives its name from being placed after physics in the writings of Aristotle. But in fact, metaphysics denotes the science of what is beyond (*meta*) nature (*physika*) of an object above the mere material. Many of the early Greek philosophical writings bore the title ‘Concerning Nature’ (the Greek term for nature was *physika*). These words usually dealt with what we would now consider physical science, but there were also speculations about the meaning and nature of the universe - that is, with questions which arise *after* the physical problems have been resolved, or which are concerned with what lies after or beyond the physical world of sensory experience. Thus, metaphysics denotes the science of what is beyond (*meta*) the nature (*physika*) of an object. In the medieval and modern philosophy, metaphysics has been taken to mean the study of things transcending nature, i.e., existing separately from nature and having more intrinsic reality and value than the things of nature, giving *meta* a philosophical meaning it did not have in classical Greek. Since Immanuel Kant, metaphysics has often meant *apriori* speculation on question that cannot be answered by scientific observation and experiment. The term has also been popularly associated with the spiritual or religious. In modern philosophical usage, metaphysics refers generally to the field of philosophy, dealing with questions about the kinds of things there are and their modes of being.

Various names have been given to Metaphysics which, in fact, emphasizes the different aspects and attributes of one and the same science. Aristotle’s name for metaphysics was ‘First Philosophy’ as it is dealing with the first causes and principles of reality. Metaphysics enjoyed a primacy of excellence or dignity over all the other sciences. The name ‘First Philosophy’ clearly explains the central place that metaphysics occupies in the whole of philosophy. It also distinguishes metaphysics from all other branches of philosophy which Aristotle called as ‘secondary philosophies’. Aristotle also called it the divine science because it treats of the most divine beings, that is, substances which are separated from matter and above them, Pure Act or Prime Mover.

In the seventeenth century, Christian Wolff called it “Ontology”, theory of being, a name deriving from the Greek *on* = being, and *logos* = theory or doctrine. This is evidently the most simple and the most exact term. Many of the modern philosophers prefer the name ‘ontology’ instead of ‘metaphysics.’ Yet, some have rejected it giving as a reason that the term ontology has been used sometimes in an idealistic sense to

mean the science of the idea of being, or an a priori knowledge without relation to experience. But the term metaphysics can cause just as much equivocation as the term ontology itself.

1.3 DEFINITION OF METAPHYSICS

Metaphysics may be considered as the study of the ultimate causes and of the first and most universal principles of Being. Ultimate causes are differentiated from proximate causes which produce, in an immediate manner, some specific effects. Ultimate causes or the supreme causes, in contrast, extend their influence, to all the effects within a given sphere. Metaphysics considers the absolutely ultimate cause of the universe. It strives to identify that cause and know more about its nature and its activity.

Metaphysics studies the first and most universal principles of all things, Being. Aside from causes that exert their influence on their effects from outside, there exists internal elements in the effect themselves that constitute them and affect their manner of being and acting. These are usually called principles. (Thus atoms are certain principles of molecules which determine the nature and properties of the latter; in living beings, cells act like the principles of the organism). Metaphysics seeks the first and most universal principles, that is, those principles which radically constitute all things. Thus philosophers consider some particular aspect of reality as the most basic, and as such the origin of everything else (for example, change or becoming, quantity, the essence etc.).

Whenever someone considers something as the first intrinsic principle of everything, one is already talking at the metaphysical level. At this level, metaphysics includes everything real within its field of study because it seeks the ultimate cause and fundamental principles of things; in contrast, particular sciences study only a limited aspect of the world. These sciences advance in their own field thanks to a body of permanent knowledge which serves as their basis, and which is always assumed or taken for granted in every scientific research. For example, the notions of plant life, of life in general, the material body, quantity and the like. Scientists ordinarily do not conduct further studies regarding these, but if they ask, “what is life?”, “What is quantity?”, “What is to know, to see and to feel?”, then they are already posing philosophical questions. These are actual questions which are more radical and basic than the questions generally posed by the scientists, and which are in turn presupposed by them: “What does it mean to be?”, “What is causality?”, “What is the meaning of the universe?”, “What is truth?”, “What is good?” etc. In all these questions, one is looking for the core and ground of all knowledge.

Thus, Bernard Lonergan (1904 – 1984) would describe metaphysics as ‘the core and ground of human knowledge as it underlies, penetrates, transforms and unifies all other departments of knowledge.’ First, *it underlies all other departments*: It underlies all other departments since its principles are the detached and disinterested drive of the pure desire to know. The unfolding of the pure desire to know takes place in the empirical, intellectual and rational consciousness of the self-affirming subject. All questions, all insights, all formulations, all reflections and all judgments proceed from the unfolding of that drive. Hence, metaphysics underlies logic, mathematics and all other sciences. Second, *it penetrates all other departments*: For other departments are constituted of the same principles as that of metaphysics. They are particular departments related to particular viewpoints. Yet, all departments spring from a common source and seek a common compatibility and coherence. Hence, they are

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penetrated by metaphysics. Third, *it transforms all other departments*: Metaphysics originates from the ‘experience of something’. It is free from the realization of particular viewpoints. It distinguishes positions from counter-positions in the whole of knowledge. It is a transforming principle that urges positions to fuller development. By reversing counter-positions, it liberates discoveries from the shackles in which they were formulated. Fourth, *it unifies all other departments*: For other departments respond to particular ranges of questions; whereas metaphysics deals with the original, total question, and in this way, it moves to the total answer transforming and putting together all other answers. Hence, we may define metaphysics as *the core and ground of all knowledge, which is the science of being as being*.

Check Your Progress I

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is the etymological meaning of metaphysics?

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2) How does Bernard Lonergan explain metaphysics?

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1.4 SCOPE OF METAPHYSICS: MATERIAL AND FORMAL OBJECT

Generally, matter, in philosophy, indicates the indeterminate but determinable element, and ‘form’ the determining element. These relative meaning of ‘material’ and ‘formal’ are also found in the theoretical sciences especially when there is questions of the ‘material object’ and the ‘formal object’ of a science. *Material Object* is the definite realm or definite subject matter which a science deals with. For instance, man, inanimate matter, the stars, the earth, language, religion, law etc. *Formal Object* is that special aspect of the material object which is under consideration or study. A definite material object that is taken as the general matter to be studied will have too many knowable aspects to be grasped fully in a single intellectual consideration. To arrive at a well-founded total view, one will have to approach it in quasi-partial studies, i.e., through formal and analytic abstraction, the various aspects of the object. The material object so considered in a definite aspect, is thus called formal object. *The material object of metaphysics* includes all things which fall under the notion of being, ‘such as actual

or possible, abstract or concrete, material or immaterial, finite or infinite. *The formal object of metaphysics* is the study of 'being as being,' *ens in quantum ens*. That is to say, metaphysics does not restrict itself to any particular being or part of that being, but rather treats of what is *common to all beings*, namely, Being which is the ground of beings since all beings are in Being. Being is not a particular thing though it embraces everything in it. That which is not particular is still *something or in some way*. Hence, *Being is that which is in some way or something*. All of us know that everyone has always and everywhere an experience of 'something.' This experience of 'something' is an inescapable experience. One may escape from a particular experience, but one cannot escape from experiencing something. The most fundamental and radical question one can raise is this: 'Is there anything at all?' The answer can either be a negation or an affirmation. If it is a negation it should be so: 'There is nothing.' Such an answer is self-contradictory as the answer affirms a negation which is again 'something.' Hence, an absolute negation is impossible. For, paradoxically every absolute negation presupposes an absolute affirmation upon which the negation rests. This affirmative experience of 'something' is not 'that which is not' but 'that which is' or 'Being' which is in some way or something.

Of course, our *knowledge of Being is an act of intuition*, because of the indubitable, inseparable, and immediate self-presence of being as being to my knowing in a pre-predicative certainty which precedes the formation of all explicit concepts and judgments. But this intuition is so imperfect that it does not yet say anything explicit about identity or participation, unity or plurality, etc. Because of this imperfection of our intuition we are forced to express the knowledge of *Being* by means of a *judgment*. Now that the problem facing us is no longer that of being as being, but the problem of one and many, i.e., we will have to investigate more accurately the nature of the predicate which is common to all and ask ourselves how a predicate that does not express any plurality, finiteness, imperfection, or indetermination can be predicated of distinct, manifold, finite, imperfect, and determinable subjects. This investigation will have to show how the most universal concept expresses everything at the same time, but simultaneously falls short because of its inadequacy. Taken in an absolute sense, *Being pertains to everything*: the necessary, the real, and even the possible, the object known and the knowing subject, the concept and what is conceived, what is perceived and what is purely proposed in imagination or thought, and even the purely apparent. Therefore, Being or 'something' is the absolutely all-embracing notion. It is a general notion. By 'general' is meant one which refers to many. Thus it means here that 'Being' is predicated of each of many beings distributively as multiplied in these many. *Being is the absolutely general notion*, because it is predicated not merely of a group of beings but absolutely of all. If Being is the absolute general notion, *it cannot be defined*; for a definition places the concept defined under a more general thought content or genus (higher class) and indicates how it differs from other concepts falling under the same genus by means of a specific difference. But the notion of Being does not fall under a higher, more general concept and therefore it is not a species. It is the first known in which everything else that is known, thought or proposed is already present and presupposed. We can describe the notion of Being only if we recognize a certain structure in it. Like all our concepts, it is not perfectly simple, but shows a certain dichotomy of bearer and form. Being is that which is, that which has 'Being', that which has a reference to 'Being', and through which 'Being' is. If Being is considered as a predicate, it is a participle and emphasizes the participation in 'Being'. If it is used as a subject, it is a noun and stresses that which participates in 'Being', the bearer or the subject of 'Being'. Now a question arises: Is Being known by abstraction?

Abstraction is the operation by which the mind leaves aside, abstracts *from* certain aspects of a being. When the intellect abstracts it *out* of the whole complex of a being, it does so as it discovers that other beings also exhibit this same feature. The more the content of a thought is abstract and leaves aside more particular contents, the more does its extension become general, universal and predicable of a large number. The opposite of abstraction is contraction which is a process by which the mind adds again to the central characteristic of a being the aspects which were left behind through abstraction. Since this central feature was universal, contraction will limit a concept from the more universal to the more particular. Accordingly, an increase in comprehension is accompanied by a decrease in extension. The abstraction in question is generalizing abstraction, called '*total*' abstraction. It is a logical process in which one and the same concrete whole, e.g., John, is considered under an increasingly more general aspect, for instance, as human, sentient being, living being, corporeal being. It means that the being from which the concept is abstracted is not expressed as to one of its parts only but as a whole: the totality is expressed but not totally. For this reason the concept obtained through total abstraction can be predicated of more particular concepts and of the individual being, e.g., John is a human, or a human is a sentient being. If we suppose that the concept of a being is the most abstract in the sense of total abstraction, it would retain only that in which the many beings agree, but leave aside that in which they differ. The differences would be expressed in differentiating concepts that stand independently alongside the notion of Being. They would have to be added to it through contraction as positive enrichments of its content if one wanted to arrive at knowledge of the various beings. Thus there would be a plurality of concepts. Nevertheless, these many thought contents would have to constitute a certain unity, no matter how imperfect it is. Hence the notion of Being and the differentiating concepts would have to show a certain similarity with one another. But then this similarity itself through a process of abstraction could be isolated in a higher and more general concept and so on to infinity, without ever allowing us to reach the absolutely supreme and first notion. However, because of the unity of thinking as well as that of the thinkable, there has to be a supreme and all-embracing concept. Hence the most general concept cannot be obtained through abstraction which leaves aside the differences. Therefore, this concept is of another nature than abstract concepts. It has to include also the differentiating concepts, not merely potentially as in concepts that are obtained through total abstraction, but *actually*. Thus it is not possible to perform a perfect conceptual separation of that in which beings are similar and that in which they differ. Otherwise, since they are similar in this that they all *are*, their dissimilarity would have to lie in something that is beyond *Being* i.e., in non-Being. But non-*Being* cannot be the foundation of a difference; for to differ is *to be* different, to be in a different way. Therefore, the various beings differ in *Being* itself. Accordingly, the differentiating concepts, which express the distinct modes of *Being* of the various beings, such as subsistent, accidental, material, or spiritual, do not contain absolutely anything. But in that case they are not additions to the notion of Being. Consequently, they must lie within the content itself of Being as its *immanent precisions*. Thus it follows that the notion of Being is not abstract in the proper sense of the term 'total abstraction.' The notion of 'Being' extends to all beings not only insofar as they are similar but also insofar as they are dissimilar, and contains them in all aspects. For this reason we call the notion of Being '*transcendental*'. It is not only the absolutely general concept, transcending all other concepts in extension, but it is at the same time absolutely all-embracing inasmuch as it somehow includes all other possible thought contents. Being transcends every genus and all differences: it contains in an eminent way not only the highest abstract concepts or general, but also the differentiating concepts and therefore

also the concepts of species. Everything in every concept is permeated with the notion of Being. The term 'transcendental' is opposed to "categorical." A concept is 'categorical' insofar as it falls under one of the categories or predicaments which are the fundamental concepts. These are positively distinct and thus opposed to one another and do not agree in a higher general concept obtained through proper abstraction. It is to these categories that univocal concepts of genus and species are reduced. 'Transcendental' belongs first of all to 'Being'. For this reason we give the name 'transcendental properties of being' to the properties which flow from being as being. Such characteristics, flowing from the identity of Being with itself, are the following: unity, truth, goodness, and beauty. In a somewhat *broader* sense one may consider as transcendental properties those which pertain not to all beings but to beings having a higher mode of *Being*, inasmuch as they do not include any imperfection in themselves. 'Transcendental' in the Kantian sense is opposed to 'empirical' and applies to *knowledge* insofar as this knowledge is not concerned with objects but with the subjective *a priori* possibility of knowing objects 'Transcendental' should also be distinguished from 'transcendent,' i.e., what transcends a given order of *being* and is independent of it. With reference to the cognitive object, 'transcendent' means that which is above the cognitive immanence of the object. With respect to the world of experience, it indicates what lies beyond the world of experience. And with regard to the finite, it applies to what transcends everything finite. Accordingly, the difference between the transcendental notion of Being and abstract general concepts lie in this: 'Being' belongs to a being not only because of its similarity but also because of its dissimilarity with the other beings; whereas the unity of the abstract-general concept results from its abstraction.

True, the notion of Being actually contains anything whatsoever that in any way has a reference to 'Being' and includes even the differences through which the various beings are in their own way. But as a concept or intermediary representation of our thinking, it is unable to give us adequate knowledge of the universal interconnection uniting 'everything that is.' This imperfectness consists in the fact that, although this idea contains the different modes of *Being* actually, it contains them only implicitly and confusedly. Despite their being contained in this notion, they are not yet known explicitly and distinctly. For this reason sometimes the term 'improper' abstraction is used with respect to the notion of Being, for it does not leave anything behind but it does not yet say everything explicitly. Thus there is need for other concepts. However, these concepts are not wholly and entirely different, but only more explicit renderings of what is already contained in the notion of Being. Accordingly, the development of thought consists in an immanent explicitation of the notion of Being, so that in an increasingly more adequate way everything which through *Being* is possible and all its realizations are brought to explicit knowledge in more determined concepts. It is only in this way that the full richness of the notion of 'Being' reveals itself. The transition from the confused notion to the explicit grasp of 'that which is' depends on experience and the insight contained in it. It is only through experience that we are placed in the presence of the various modes of *Being*, which we cannot immediately deduce from the general notion of Being itself. If Being is the absolutely general notion, it belongs to everything. But if at the same time it is transcendental and thus contains not merely potentially but actually the differentiating concepts, how can it be predicated of the various beings and aspects of *Being* in the same undifferentiated sense? In other words, the notion of Being is predicated of many in a sense that is neither absolutely the same nor entirely different. It has a unity of meaning because its sense reveals not an absolute but a *relative similarity* in the judgments we make about different beings commonly called '*analogy*'.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

- 1) Explain the formal object of metaphysics
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- 2) What do you understand by “Being”?
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1.5 LET US SUM UP

Metaphysics has constantly aspired to say what there is in the world and to determine the real nature of things. It has been preoccupied with the questions of existence and reality. Metaphysics has been commonly presented as the most fundamental and also the most comprehensive of inquiries. It claims to be fundamental because questions about what there is or about the ultimate nature of things underlie all particular inquiries. The questions about existence and reality, along with those about potential and actual being and about causation cut across the boundaries of particular sciences and arise in connection with every sort of subject matter. Thus Metaphysics is comprehensive just because of its extreme generality. Again, whereas sciences like physics and mathematics are departmental studies each of which deals with a part or particular aspect of reality, metaphysics, by contrast, is concerned with the world as a whole. Often inquiries in the individual sciences are carried out under assumptions which it is the business of Metaphysics to make explicit and either to justify or to correct. Metaphysics, by contrast, proceeds without assumptions and is thus fully self-critical. Metaphysical propositions derive their unique certainty from their being the products of reason when that faculty is put to work in the fullest and freest way. The result will be that metaphysics is not only the most fundamental of studies, but it is also one which relies for its results on the efforts of reason alone.

1.6 KEY WORDS

- Material Object** : Material object is the general subject matter of a science which is the common subject-matter of several sciences.
- Formal Object** : Formal object is the specific aspect of the subject matter of a science which belongs to the science under consideration only.

1.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) It was Andronicus of Rhodes, around 60 AD, while editing the manuscripts of Aristotle, labeled the books which happened to be placed after Aristotle's works on 'physics' as '*meta ta physika*,' meaning 'after physics'. But in fact, metaphysics denotes the science of what is beyond (*meta*) nature (*physika*) of an object above the mere material. Many of the early Greek philosophical writings bore the title 'Concerning Nature' (the Greek term for nature was *physika*). These words usually dealt with what we would now consider physical science, but there were also speculations about the meaning and nature of the universe – that is, with questions which arise *after* the physical problems have been resolved, or which are concerned with what lies after or beyond the physical world of sensory experience. Thus, etymologically metaphysics denotes the science of what is beyond (*meta*) the physical nature (*physika*) of an object.
- 2) Bernard Lonergan (1904 – 1984) would describe metaphysics as 'the core and ground of human knowledge as it underlies, penetrates, transforms and unifies all other departments of knowledge.' First, *it underlies all other departments*: It underlies all other departments since its principles are the detached and disinterested drive of the pure desire to know. The unfolding of the pure desire to know takes place in the empirical, intellectual and rational consciousness of the self-affirming subject. All questions, all insights, all formulations, all reflections and all judgments proceed from the unfolding of that drive. Hence, metaphysics

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underlies logic, mathematics and all other sciences. Second, *it penetrates all other departments*: For other departments are constituted of the same principles as that of metaphysics. They are particular departments related to particular viewpoints. Yet, all departments spring from a common source and seek a common compatibility and coherence. Hence, they are penetrated by metaphysics. Third, *it transforms all other departments*: Metaphysics originates from the 'experience of something'. It is free from the realization of particular viewpoints. It distinguishes positions from counter-positions in the whole of knowledge. It is a transforming principle that urges positions to fuller development. By reversing counter-positions, it liberates discoveries from the shackles in which they were formulated. Fourth, *it unifies all other departments*: For other departments respond to particular ranges of questions; whereas metaphysics deals with the original, total question, and in this way, it moves to the total answer transforming and putting together all other answers. Hence, we may define metaphysics as *the core and ground of all knowledge, which is the science of being as being*.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) *The formal object of metaphysics* is the study of 'being as being,' *ens in quantum ens*. That is to say, metaphysics does not restrict itself to any particular being or part of that being, but rather treats of what is *common to all beings*, namely, Being which is the ground of beings since all beings are in Being. Being is not a particular thing though it embraces everything in it.
- 2) *Being is that which is in some way* or something. All of us know that everyone has always and everywhere an experience of 'something.' This experience of 'something' is an inescapable experience. One may escape from a particular experience, but one cannot escape from experiencing something. The most fundamental and radical question one can raise is this: 'Is there anything at all?' The answer can either be a negation or an affirmation. If it is a negation it should be so: 'There is nothing.' Such an answer is self-contradictory as the answer affirms a negation which is again 'something.' Hence, an absolute negation is impossible. For, paradoxically every absolute negation presupposes an absolute affirmation upon which the negation rests. This affirmative experience of 'something' is not 'that which is not' but 'that which is' or 'Being' which is in some way or something.