

PHIL 4603: Metaphysics  
Prof. Funkhouser  
What is Metaphysics?

- What is the subject matter of metaphysics?

Metaphysics is the study of what exists (ontology) and the nature of things at the most abstract level of investigation. (Metaphysics, as a serious branch of philosophy, should not be confused with the “New Age” stuff that sometimes goes by this name, e.g., in bookstore shelving practices.) This is not a very informative answer, I know. Metaphysics is best understood by actually engaging with the problems that have traditionally been classified as “metaphysical”. Thumb through our anthology to get a sense of these problems, or look at the examples provided on our syllabus.

Among other things, metaphysics should be distinguished from epistemology — the theory of how we acquire *knowledge of* reality, as well as the limits and nature of knowledge.

- What is the methodology for doing metaphysics?

Metaphysics has traditionally employed the *a priori* method, pure thought alone without reliance on empirical evidence. This has sometimes led to it being ridiculed as mere “armchair speculation”. But metaphysics should not be *mere* speculation. Metaphysicians should offer theories, explanations, and accounts that are to be evaluated by the same general standards that we apply in other domains. Like most analytic philosophers, metaphysicians typically employ a combination of conceptual analysis, thought experiments and intuition pumps, arguments, and theories.

It is often thought that its methodology distinguishes metaphysics from science. Science uses empirical methods of testing, whereas metaphysics does not use empirical methods. Nevertheless, metaphysical claims should, at a minimum, be consistent with our empirical discoveries. Unfortunately, many philosophers have been embarrassed by claiming on *a priori* grounds alone that something is impossible, only to have it turn out to be actual! But, further, an *empirical* metaphysics is not necessarily a contradiction in terms.

Many contemporary philosophers believe, as did many of the Moderns, that metaphysics should be informed by the science of the day.

○ Conceptual Analysis and Conceptual Connections

Philosophers spend a lot of time defining their terms. Sometimes these definitions are merely stipulative, other times they are not. This is good practice to make sure that we fully understand each other and that our disagreements (or agreements, for that matter) are not merely verbal. But often we want to gain an understanding of a concept that goes beyond definition. In such cases, we might engage in *conceptual analysis*. This is like the activity that Socrates was engaged in when he was searching after the various Forms — e.g., of piety or virtue.

Conceptual analysis is sometimes understood as the quest for *necessary and (jointly) sufficient conditions*. E.g., What features are common to all (necessity) and only (sufficiency) pious actions? What features are common to all and only virtuous actions? If we can come up with answers to these questions, then we will have recipes for determining if some as yet unclassified action is pious or virtuous. The necessary and (jointly) sufficient conditions for some kind can be thought of as those *in virtue of which* things are of that kind.

Metaphysicians often engage in conceptual analysis. But what value, you might ask, is there in such conceptual analysis? What do we get out of this linguistic gamesmanship? Isn't this activity just a word game with no real insight or meaningful contribution? Presumably philosophers engage in conceptual analysis because there is some end-state that they find desirable. But what is so desirable about this end-state?

I suggest the following answers:

1. When we have an analysis of a concept (be it correct or not), we have at least systematized usage so as to *foster better understanding and communication*.
2. An analysis of a concept provides us with a *recipe for classifying objects or events*.

These first two answers are very close to the surface. They almost tell us what a correct analysis amounts to, rather than saying what is so good about it. The next 5 answers go deeper:

3. An analysis can lead to *changes in our perceptions and/or thoughts* of particular objects or events. When, by attending to

our analysis of the concept of  $y$ , we come to judge that  $x$  is a  $y$ , this often changes our perceptions and/or thoughts about  $x$ .

4. An analysis can *alter our practices*.
5. An analysis often *informs our standards of evaluation* for that kind.
6. An analysis of a prized concept, such as knowledge or free will, can also *reveal why the concept is thought to be important, valuable, etc.*
7. An analysis, and the categorization that inevitably follows, might also be *needed for official, practical, and oftentimes bureaucratic purposes*.

Not only do philosophers analyze concepts in isolation, but we also search for connections that hold across concepts. E.g., What is the concept of free will, and how does it relate to the concept of determinism? These projects have traditionally been done *a priori*. Thought experiments and appeals to the individual's intuition, discussed below, have been major components of the analytic philosopher's methodology. However in recent years a group of philosophers, known as *experimental philosophers*, has applied empirical methods to this process (and others).

#### ◦ Thought Experiments and Intuitions

Philosophers also talk a lot about far-fetched, crazy, and fantastical situations that occur in "other possible worlds". But do not let talk of "other possible worlds" scare you. I will typically treat such talk as a figure of speech for referring to ways that the world (universe) could have been. And there are all sorts of ways the world could have been.

So, what is the point of talking about other possible worlds? Why not just talk about this one? For one, talking about other possible worlds can simplify matters and abstract away from many unnecessary details of the actual world. So, philosophers might talk about other possible worlds for the very same reason that a physics professor might talk about a frictionless plane. Secondly, there is an intimate connection between the correct analysis of a concept and what is possible. Namely, a correct analysis of a concept reveals the boundaries of its application. For example, if it is part of the very concept of moral responsibility that one is morally responsible for something only if one could have done otherwise, then there is no possible world in which one is morally responsible for an action though she could not have done otherwise. If a clever philosopher comes up with such a case, then he has refuted this (partial) analysis of moral responsibility.

Such invocations of other possible worlds are *thought experiments*. We do not actually investigate these other worlds (that's impossible); we simply think about them and draw conclusions. The conclusions we draw are guided by our intuitive reactions. E.g., Does it seem correct that the person in the clever philosopher's example is morally responsible? Many analytic philosophers put a lot of weight on these intuitions. But the appeal to thought experiments and intuition is certainly not a new development in the history of philosophy (or science, for that matter). For further discussion, see: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thought-experiment/>

- Arguments

Many philosophers also offer arguments, and metaphysicians are no exception. Arguments have *premises* and *conclusions*. The conclusion is that which the proponent of the argument is trying to convince someone else to accept as true. The premises are the reasons for accepting the conclusion. The premises should connect so that they rationally support the conclusion (i.e., the conclusion "follows" from the premises).

Arguments can go wrong, and be rationally criticized, in two ways. First, one or more of the premises could be false. Second, the conclusion might not follow from the premises, even if the premises are true. In the second case, we say that the argument is *invalid*. (An argument is valid if the premises jointly guarantee the truth of the conclusion.) It is good to keep in mind that arguments can be rationally criticized in these two ways: on factual grounds or on purely logical grounds. One advantage of knowing logic is that you can then rationally criticize arguments even when you are ignorant of the truth of the premises. We will consider some arguments throughout the semester, and you should always look to see if there are objections of either the factual or logical variety.

- Skepticism and disdain for metaphysics

If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

It should be noted that metaphysics has been viewed with great skepticism, and even outright disdain, by some significant historical, as well as contemporary, philosophers. The Logical Positivists, who were very influential in

the 20th Century, held, for reasons that trace back to Hume, that metaphysical statements are literally *meaningless*. (See A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* for a classic statement of this position.) If they were correct, then metaphysical "disputes" would be merely pseudo-disputes over pseudo-questions. Others have thought that metaphysical disputes are meaningful, but either unanswerable or irrelevant (and, therefore, idle). We should clearly distinguish these two types of criticism.