

# What is metaphysics ?

The one and only meaningful definition,  
and why traditional academic philosophy is  
unlikely ever to embrace it

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‘Metaphysics’ is the quest to find the ultimate meaning and purpose of existence. It is about trying to find a decisive and conclusive resolution to the human condition, such that the human condition is fulfilled in some absolute way, and no longer at the mercy of meaningless suffering, or a dreadful sense of uncertainty. All other definitions and determinations of metaphysics are trivial, and irrelevant; and, given the critical importance of the quest for human fulfilment – our lives are not infinite, after all – really quite bewildering. Western philosophy<sup>1</sup> has never understood this, and its entire intellectual history has been characterised by a persistent debasing of any simple, straightforward and direct quest for objective metaphysical self-knowledge, preferring instead always to indulge either in pedantic squabbling over definitions, distinctions and conceptual manoeuvrings, or in flatulent ‘system building’.

Now obviously such a provocative opening gambit is going to require considerable justification if it is to get its message across, and not be dismissed out of hand. Not because its propositions are either naïve or excessive, but rather because academic metaphysics is so perverted in its methods and thinking as to make even the most basic statement of common currency a cause for endless questioning and bickering, necessitating all manner of so-called subtle analyses and conceptual clarifications, and inevitably descending into yet another worthless intellectual stalemate. This is not to deny the importance of definitional clarity and conceptual precision, but rather to make the point that beyond a certain relatively easily attainable basic level of agreement, persistent nit-picking and semantic wrangling is a clear symptom of intellectual degeneracy, not of acuity.

And semantic nit-picking is the least of the problems: there’s also the very bizarre phenomenon of ‘ontological confusion’, which characterises many disciplines wholly concerned with abstractions and ‘theory’; and what happens is that people confuse the abstract conceptualisation of an entity with the very entities that those abstractions are meant to be a representation of, and very soon are quite unable to distinguish between the two. This is not some trivial error of procedure, easily corrected with a moment’s thought, but a deep-seated, persistent and almost mystical self-delusion that can confuse people for an entire lifetime. Many scholars go to the grave thinking that they are experts in a subject when in fact they are only experts in ‘ideas *about* that subject’, and they have no first-hand knowledge whatsoever about the actual realities they believe they have expertise in. This is one of the many truly hard-to-credit facts about the way we human beings think.

This is easily illustrated with examples from the supposed ‘scholarly study of religion’, but they could just as easily apply to anthropology and a host of other disciplines. What happens is that scholars sort various concepts into various abstract categories, and then elucidate the supposed links between these categories. The belief in the academic community is that someone who has successfully carried out such abstract scholarship is entitled to think of themselves as an ‘expert in that field’, rather than an ‘expert in an abstract representation *of* that field’. Someone who has studied say, Buddhist scriptures, and written some heavyweight tomes on the subject, listing various supposed Buddhist conceptions and their interrelationships, will be considered by

all – including many Buddhists themselves ! – to have achieved ‘expertise in Buddhism’, whereas their expertise is only in ‘abstract ideas about Buddhism’. ‘Ideas *about* a phenomenon’ and ‘the phenomenon itself’ are ontologically separate and distinct, yet are everywhere confused and conflated, and this is especially pertinent when it comes to metaphysics.

Another example. Suppose you have the ‘blessed good fortune’ to be accepted at the foremost theological college on earth, where you can study theology to your heart’s content. And after a certain number of years of intense reading, discussion, research, and writing, you are awarded a doctorate in theology. Now the question that needs to be asked is this: what is the relationship between a ‘maximally advanced theological knowledge’ and a ‘direct knowledge of God’ ? Does the former lead to the latter ? If not, why bother with theology ? Does reading about playing the piano lead – even by magical osmosis – to an ability to do so ? The point being made here is that without direct knowledge of something, ‘theory’ – no matter how exquisite – has no real value of any kind, it’s only ‘conceptual white noise’, and just another instance of the very many forms of mystical self-narcosis whereby we humans believe we can know something ‘by association’ – that is, by an act of vicarious imagining, and by mulling over abstracted ideas – when in fact only direct first-hand knowledge will do. What use is it to study everything possible about a subject, if you don’t know what that subject is like in reality ? Does what you claim to ‘know’ theoretically even qualify as ‘real knowledge’ of any sort in this situation ?

But surely no one could be so stupid as to confuse the ‘idea of fire’ with ‘fire itself’ ? Well, look at the evidence. If you were to ask an academic philosopher ‘what do you know about your own metaphysical reality ?’ – and could get past the feeble opening gambits like ‘what do you mean by ‘reality’ ?’ – they will inevitably reach for a conceptualisation of some sort, made up of bits of other people’s accounts, and present that as if it were their own knowledge. And if you then ask them to put aside what they have heard or read, and simply to report what they can see with their own ‘mind’s eye’<sup>2</sup>, they will have nothing to say. Not a single word.

But isn’t philosophy ‘all about ideas’ ? What’s wrong with treating them as abstract substitutes for the real thing ? This is precisely the elemental mistake that has reduced academic metaphysics to the unmitigated tripe that it currently remains: one’s metaphysical being is much more than mere abstractions and conceptual distinctions, but you can only know this with any conviction if you take a look at your own being with your own powers of observation. Otherwise you remain at the mercy of the ‘big names’ and their musings, and the problem with all the big names in western philosophy is that none of them ever had even the faintest idea about the essential features of the human metaphysical condition, and how we might go about trying to grapple with, let alone resolve, its mystery. It’s as if philosophers wanted to play the piano, but early on decided that just ‘thinking about playing’ would be just as good as ‘actually playing’, and so started a discipline where you only toyed with ideas and nothing else, and they called the whole abstract procedure ‘playing the piano’. Worse still, none of them made any attempt to disabuse others of the ridiculous idea that they were actually masters of the instrument, despite the fact their fingers have never been near a keyboard. Someone playing this sort of game in everyday life would be pitied as a pathetic and deluded fool, but in the world of philosophy it could get you tenure at Harvard.

How did we arrive at such a Dadaesque situation ? Impossible to tell, but given the history of philosophy, and its millennia of misdirected and worthless speculation, we have to face the very real possibility that human beings are just not that bothered about serious questions of a metaphysical nature. They prefer the fun and games of life. There seems to be something innate in us which prevents us from wanting to think clearly about ourselves, except in a very worldly sense. We seem to be happier clutching at distractions, and holding fast to them come what may,

as if this is the best we can do, and as if there is something noble in doing so. Perhaps there is, if we take an indulgent and sentimental look at our species: other creatures may have feathers or scales or whatever, whereas we humans are all about living in the moment, and maximising our worldly enjoyment.

However, for those few who are mysteriously drawn to the idea of objective metaphysical self-knowledge, and who would really like to get to the bottom of things, there is always the option of turning one's 'knowing capacity'<sup>3</sup> on to itself, to see what it can reveal. This is the only possible place where authentic metaphysics can begin.

Things being what they are with our common conceptions, most people reading this will be anticipating some sort of hidden agenda, most likely of a religious nature, which will be introduced surreptitiously, putting everything into perspective. But this is not the intention here: we are only interested in pursuing objective metaphysical knowledge – knowledge independent of conceptualisations and ideology – to the extent that such knowledge is possible. We are only interested in 'playing the piano' – actually putting our fingers on the keyboard – rather than just analysing our theoretical imaginings about it.

Where do we start? We have to begin by clearly identifying the primordial sense that we all have – at some time or another – that something is not quite right with our 'existence'<sup>4</sup> itself, and that nothing that happens to us in life, or nothing that we actively achieve, is ever going to change that. In other words, this 'something not quite right' about our existence lies, as it were, 'outside'<sup>5</sup> – above and beyond – the course of our lives, though it seems to have the ability to poison anything and everything we do in life itself with a sense of ultimate meaninglessness. This does not mean that we actually spend our entire existence in a state of existential agony, but rather that we do have to confront, every now and then, a deep sense of existential doubt, and wonder, and perplexity. Sometimes the feeling is no more than a passing thought; at others, it rises to the level of an anxiety and dread which borders on existential torture.

This sense of primordial wrongness, which we can label as our 'ontological dissatisfaction', is our lodestar – and our compass – in metaphysics. Everything we do, and think, and reflect on, has to be tested against this very deep-seated dissatisfaction, this sense of primordial wrongness, because it is the only independent yardstick we have with which to test our 'progress', or at least what we think might count as progress. And in this regard – assessing our progress – we have to cultivate a ruthless self-honesty within which we are prepared for endless disappointments rather than delude ourselves into thinking that we have achieved a final resolution – or even a temporary fix – when clearly we haven't.

And in addition to the lodestar of our 'ontological dissatisfaction' – that is, our most primordial, most basic sense of existential wrongness, uncertainty and dread – we also have a simple yet powerful intellectual resource which, when correctly employed, is key to any possible sense of clarity and lucidity. And it amounts to no more than the ability to ask, in all honesty<sup>6</sup>, the blindingly obvious question 'Is this true?', meaning, 'Does this idea I have in my mind's eye match the objective facts, as far as I grasp them?', or 'Is my thinking accurate?', or better still, 'Is this how it is?' This whole frame of mind may seem breathtakingly naïve, and perhaps even vaguely adolescent, given the grand complexities, contortions and convolutions of academic philosophical thinking, but it needs to be clearly understood, as soon as is practicable, that these academic convolutions invariably represent not advancements in intellectual exploration, but rather an infantile self-deluding façade masking a total absence of any real grasp and understanding of the elemental principles of metaphysics: it doesn't matter how many doctorates you have, or how many books you have written, if you are unable to answer – to yourself, for yourself – simple questions like 'Is this true?', or 'Is this how it really is?'

The difficulty facing this kind of portrayal of elemental metaphysics is that it destroys, at a stroke, the pompous ‘clever-dickery’ that underpins all of professional philosophy. Philosophers learn, as part of their tradecraft, how to argue complex topics; and by the time they have graduated they should be able to wrongfoot an unwary and inexperienced opponent without much effort, firstly by setting the terms of debate in their favour, and then by displaying a far greater familiarity and dexterity with the slippery conceptual opportunities offered by the argument they are defending. An ‘opponent’ – perhaps a student, or someone less familiar with the topic – likely stumbles unwittingly down conceptual blind alleys, and fails to appreciate the various ‘subtle distinctions’ in play, and is then made to look foolish as they attempt to negotiate their way out of a mess they are not sure how they got into in the first place. The ‘senior philosopher’ is then able to feel quietly confident, having witnessed yet another example of what happens when someone knows less about a topic than they do, and this can easily translate into the mistaken idea that the better you are at defending your philosophical position – no matter how abstract, arcane and worthless – the more you really know.

Yet only someone deeply beholden to philosophical sophistry in all its deluded majesty could be fooled by this kind of vacuous charade for very long. They would have to be so wedded to the system that all perspective had vanished, and with it any chance of independence of mind. It may well be that intellectual life depends on such people, and the world couldn’t be what it is without them, but they are not our concern: what we are trying to do here is outline, in the clearest and simplest possible terms that anyone can understand, the principles of the one and only area of real importance for metaphysics. It is not about cleverness, or philosophical sophistication, it is about trying to achieve a basic self-insight, in the quest for liberating self-knowledge. No special recourse to advanced thinking is required: you only have to be able to understand everyday language, and ideas in common currency. Any reasonably well educated adult can do this.

And we can now readily understand that this approach to ‘genuine metaphysics’ – simple, clear, elemental self-observation and knowledge – is never likely to find favour at academic institutions. It doesn’t allow for pompous cleverness, or needless complexity. It’s not about conceptual interrelationships, and endless subtle distinctions; nor is it about what the big names said, or how it fits into what has already been written about: the whole exercise is only about identifying and grasping the unadorned, unmediated facts of one’s existence, to the extent that one is able to perceive them, for oneself.

So having turned one’s mental gaze – one’s observational attention – on to one’s being, as one perceives it, what do we discover? Uncertainty and opacity, for sure, but these are elements of our primordial being that need exploration. And we also need to realise that, in order to avoid our quest for knowledge collapsing into a sense of terminal futility, perhaps forcing us to retreat back into philosophy or theology, we will have to come up with some sort of ‘negotiating strategy’ whereby we can think things through slowly and systematically, in the light of what it is we think we want to achieve. This kind of strategy is obviously provisional, and will necessarily be changed and improved upon in the light of whatever it is we discover – or fail to – as we continue to observe how it is we come to know things, and how it is we are able to experience things. And the important point is that this ‘negotiating strategy’ can only ever be wholly centred on ourselves, as if we were the only person in existence, and the only possible sentient being of interest, because as soon as we include worldly and societal demands, we run the risk of distorting what we can see directly in front of us with our own eyes. This singularity of our own direct vision for ourselves has nothing to do with ‘selfishness’ or ‘egotism’ or ‘solipsism’; it is simply a crucial feature of our experiential being: take a look and see for yourself – you have only one ‘mind’s eye’, or, if you prefer, ‘not two’ of them<sup>7</sup>.

Now let's consider the possibility that, in some crucial way, the account of metaphysics we have outlined here is, despite our best efforts, simply wrong. We've failed to understand that 'real metaphysics' is 'academic metaphysics'; and that if we want to know 'what's going on' with reality, we will have to familiarise ourselves with concepts such as 'modality', 'transitivity', 'compatibilism', 'dualistic interactionism'<sup>8</sup>, and the rest; and of course it will be a great help if we are also able to express ourselves using symbolic logic.

The first question to ask is, why are we – as metaphysicians – interested in 'reality'<sup>9</sup>? Perhaps for its own sake, in the way that some people are interested in astronomy, or birdwatching; and this would certainly account for the unmitigated drivel that passes for metaphysics in scholarly circles. But 'reality' is an odd subject to be dispassionate about, and we can't really take that position seriously. We are only interested in 'reality' because of the enigmatic nature of our being – half hidden, half available to us – and we hope that by getting a handle on what we think is its ultimate nature ('reality'), we might be able to resolve the disturbing mystery at the core of our existence.

What mystery? The mystery of our persistent existential dissatisfaction, and the mystery of our inability to know what, if anything, is causing it, and the mysteriousness of the mystery itself: what it is to be caught in a trap that we can't seem to get out of, while not even knowing what kind of a trap it is supposed to be? We don't even know the extent of what we don't know.

What, then, are our options? The possibilities might look endless, but they can be reduced to an important few: we could dismiss the problem, and try to ignore it; or we could anaesthetise ourselves, or we could turn to an ideology – religious or secular – in the hope that the sense of mystical wellbeing that faith of this kind affords us will count as something like a solution.

Or we could embark on a quest for metaphysical self-knowledge supported – underpinned – by the idea that, if there is something bothering us, there is very likely something 'causing' – perpetuating – this bother, and if we could find a way to discover that cause, we might be able to resolve the problem at source. This is everyday reasoning, and it does not involve unwarranted assumptions, nor does it bias the process by invoking an ideology. It does not assume that the going will be easy, or that success is assured: it simply attempts to solve the problem on its own terms, by acknowledging it in an elemental way: something is not quite right; all I am attempting to do is make good that 'something not quite right'.

Now let's suppose that we've even managed to get this simple starting position 'wrong'. Let's suppose we've failed to spot that the 'problem' – which somehow turns out not to be a problem – is in fact a 'mistaken perception' on our part, and that some kind philosopher from Harvard or Oxford can put us right, or that a crack on the head will bring us to our senses. Even under these circumstances, we will still be facing something of a mystery; that is to say, a mystery as to why we would mistakenly think our being is mysterious when in fact it is not. And the idea that we could dismiss this infinitely recurring mystery of mysteries as having been 'dealt with' by a bit of conceptual clarification is as trivial as the idea that physical science can, given time, explain everything: it can only explain everything to those who are insensitive to the metaphysical dimension of their being, and who never experience themselves as 'knowing lucidities' capable of existential self-reflection, with the extraordinary mixture of wonderment and dread that this entails. Metaphysical sensitivity is not related to academic intelligence or scholarly cleverness, which explains why many Nobel prize-winners, scientists, and the like, are invariably philosophically illiterate<sup>10</sup>.

All this has been simply to say that, from whatever angle you come at it, existence presents itself – to the lucid subject – as essentially mysterious, and that nothing that can happen to us in the course of life and experience is ever going to change that, except in a very trivial and

provisional way. And even if we are mistaken about the details, and have failed to articulate it properly, and really don't know what we have been talking about, the mystery of existence itself remains.

In this short article we have tried to show that the only possible meaningful ground of metaphysics is the basic existential mystery that haunts us all, and the only issues of genuine interest to metaphysics are those which grant us objective and direct metaphysical self-knowledge. What else could metaphysics possibly be about? What other kind of quest could be more crucial to our existential fulfilment? And the astonishing truth is that if you were to read every single book in the western metaphysical canon<sup>11</sup> – the most gruesome and disheartening prospect imaginable – you won't manage to learn a single useful fact about anything, let alone facts about your essential being; nor will you even be given the least guidance as to the direction you should be heading in. Academic metaphysics is an intellectual catastrophe, and an unconscionable waste of precious time. Something is desperately wrong with our philosophical tradition, and has been from the very start, yet this shouldn't deter those who are prepared to embark on the quest for metaphysical self-knowledge: it's not that difficult, and you already have everything you need to hand in your everyday intellect and your capacity for objective self-observation.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that 'eastern' (Hindu, Buddhist & Taoist) metaphysics is any better, but it helps to distinguish the western canon from other contenders.

<sup>2</sup> 'Mind's eye': that elusive but very real point of mental lucidity where we reflect on things, and where we get our information as to what we are experiencing.

<sup>3</sup> 'Knowing capacity': that innermost ability which allows us to know and to perceive anything at all; our everyday minds, in other words.

<sup>4</sup> 'Being' is our ongoing presence in life and experience; 'existence' is our being in its self-aware, self-reflective mode. We 'exist' to the extent that we can be reflectively self-aware of our being; simply 'being' – persisting in life – is what we do the rest of the time.

<sup>5</sup> 'Outside' and 'above and beyond' are just figurative expressions and should not be made too much of.

<sup>6</sup> Ruthless self-honesty, with no concern for what other people might think. We don't have to make our metaphysical explorations public; and in truth no one else would really be interested.

<sup>7</sup> The idea of 'not two' points of lucidity in our 'mind's eye' occurs in some schools of the Zen Buddhist tradition.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Carroll & Markosian (2014).

<sup>9</sup> One of the standard definitions of metaphysics is that it is concerned with 'reality', finding out what is ultimately real, but of course, everything being contested, there are others: see Moore (2013), Introduction.

<sup>10</sup> 'Philosophy' in the sense of a genuine interest in objective metaphysical knowledge.

<sup>11</sup> Make sure you've read everything listed in Moore (2013).

## Bibliography:

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