

Philosophy of Mind and Metaphysics

Lecture I: Introduction to Metaphysics

Tim Black
California State University, Northridge
Spring 2004

I. What is metaphysics, and what is its relation to physics?

- Physics is an empirical science that seeks to explain certain basic and ubiquitous phenomena in the natural world, that is, in the realm of things that exist in space and time. To explain these phenomena, physics appeals to putative causal laws, for example, to the law of electromagnetism (which causally explains the motion of electrically charged objects) and to the law of gravitation (which causally explains the motion of massive objects).
- Metaphysics is similar to physics in that they are concerned with some of the same things. Both metaphysics and physics are concerned with the nature of things that exist in space and time and with causation.
- But metaphysics is different from physics in at least the following respects:
 - Metaphysics is not an empirical science.
 - Metaphysics is concerned not only with the nature of things that exist in space and time, but also with the nature of things that might not. It is concerned, for example, with the nature of so-called abstract entities, entities such as numbers, sets, and propositions.
 - Even when metaphysics is concerned about the nature of things that exist in space and time, these things need not be part of the proper subject-matter of physics. For example, metaphysics, but not physics, is concerned with the nature of persons, with the nature of minds, and with the nature of social or political groups.
- From all this, we can see that metaphysics is a non-empirical enterprise that is concerned with, among other things, causation, the nature of abstract objects, the nature of persons and minds, and the nature of social or political groups. But it would be nice to have a positive and more general conception of metaphysics.
- Along these lines, perhaps we can say, as Lowe does, that metaphysics has as its central concern *the fundamental structure of reality as a whole*. Its investigations are therefore not confined to the realm of living things (as are biology's investigations) or to the realm of mental states (as are psychology's) or to the realm of the physical (as are physics's).

Metaphysical investigations are constrained only by the shape of reality *as whole*, and not by the shape of any particular part of reality. This allows metaphysics to achieve an objective view of other disciplines – to step outside of them, as it were – in order to investigate the relationships between those other disciplines. For example, metaphysics seems to be in a good position to determine whether the subject-matter of one discipline – say, biology – is properly subsumed under that of another – say, physics. In fact, whenever we ask such questions, questions about the relationships between disciplines with purportedly different subject-matters, we are doing metaphysics. (But, of course, this is not the *only* way to do metaphysics.) Let's stick, then, with the following conception of metaphysics:

- Metaphysics is an enterprise whose central concern is the fundamental structure of reality as a whole, and whose investigations are constrained only by the shape of reality as a whole and not by the shape of any particular part of reality.

II. Is metaphysics a legitimate and worthwhile enterprise?

- Some might say that the legitimacy of metaphysics rests on a controversial – some might even say *false* – thesis about truth, namely, that truth is, as Lowe puts it, “single and indivisible” (p. 4). Put another way, this is the thesis that truth is universal and non-relative. Those who deny this thesis might maintain that what is true for one culture or historical epoch might not be true for another, or that different cultures or historical epochs might have, or find themselves in, different and even incommensurable realities. But even this sort of disagreement is a *metaphysical* one: to have this sort of dispute is to have a dispute over the fundamental nature of reality. We need not *settle* the dispute to see that we are doing metaphysics as soon as we *have* the dispute.
- Some might say that the legitimacy of metaphysics is undermined by what's known as naturalized epistemology, according to which knowledge, including metaphysical knowledge, must be compatible with our status as natural creatures, and any inquiry into the nature of knowledge must be a part of a more general natural scientific – hence, empirical – inquiry into our cognitive capacities. Perhaps there is no room here for metaphysical knowledge, for such knowledge is acquired via purportedly non-empirical means, and it is perhaps the case that such knowledge is incompatible with our status as natural creatures (how can *natural* creatures acquire knowledge of such apparently *unnatural* entities as propositions and sets?). Nevertheless, it is controversial whether naturalized epistemology is correct. And, here again, this sort of controversy is a *metaphysical* one: to have this sort of dispute is to have a dispute over the fundamental nature of reality. We need not *settle* the dispute to see that we are doing metaphysics as soon as we *have* the dispute.

III. How *do* we acquire metaphysical knowledge?

- The debate surrounding naturalized epistemology gives rise to an interesting question: given the presumption that we can acquire metaphysical knowledge, how *do* we acquire it? Here's what I'll say: This is a tough question.
- Here's a plausible story, although by no means the only story one could tell. Let's say that we want to know something about the nature of numbers.
 - Stage 1: Hypothesizing
 - We might begin by reflecting (on the concept of a number, say). This reflection might involve, at some point, our having a certain intuition, for example, that numbers are abstract entities – they exist, but not in space and time like trees and rocks. It might also involve our arriving at the same idea through a process of reasoning.
 - Stage 2: Experimenting and Confirming
 - Our idea, no matter how we arrive at it, is then scrutinized. One defends the idea, or criticizes it, with arguments meant to show that the idea coheres nicely, or fails to cohere, with other, perhaps less controversial ideas. The idea, if it survives this initial round of scrutiny, can (and, if philosophers have anything to say about it, *will*) be subjected to further scrutiny. If the idea holds up, we have reason to think it's true.

IV. Important terms in Lowe's Chapter 1

- Necessary
- Contingent
- Possible
- Concept
- Ontology
- Universals
- Particulars
- Abstract
- Concrete
- Properties
- Relations
- Substances