

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 What is metaphysics?

Since this book is called *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, it makes sense to begin with a short, simple, and clear definition of the word ‘metaphysics’. If only it were that easy.

Part of the problem is that it’s practically impossible to get any two philosophers to agree on a single definition of ‘metaphysics’. (And the book is, after all, written by two philosophers.) But there are also issues having to do with the strange etymology of the term ‘metaphysics’, and further complications arising from the fact that ‘metaphysics’ has one meaning in ordinary English and another meaning within (academic) philosophy. Nevertheless, we’ll do our best in this section to offer the reader what we take to be a reasonable characterization of the field of metaphysics. In fact, we’ll offer three different but mutually compatible characterizations.

Let’s start with what metaphysics is not. Metaphysics – as we are using the term – is not the study of the occult. Nor is it the study of mysticism, or auras, or the power of pyramids. Although the word ‘metaphysics’ may indeed have all of those connotations in ordinary English, the word is used within academic philosophy in an entirely different way. And this book, as it happens, is meant to be an introduction to the branch of academic philosophy that is known as ‘metaphysics’.

What about the etymology of the word ‘metaphysics’? Can that shed some light on our subject? Well, the current usage of the word has its origins in the ancient world. It seems that during the first century CE, some of Aristotle’s works were being collected and published in Alexandria. (Aristotle had died 300 or 400 years earlier, around 322 BCE.) Among these was a collection of Aristotelian writings that was given a name in ancient

Greek that is normally translated into modern English as *Physics*.<sup>1</sup> (But the name is misleading: Aristotle's *Physics* is not mainly about physics. In fact, ironically, it is mainly about metaphysics.)

Shortly after the publication of Aristotle's *Physics*, another batch of Aristotle's writings was ready for publication. The editor in charge of the project gave this other work a title in ancient Greek that means, literally, *After the Physics*. (This was the equivalent of calling it *The Book We Published after We Published Aristotle's Physics*.) Moreover, it just so happened that this other book of Aristotle's contained discussions of such important but disparate philosophical topics as existence, identity, actuality, potentiality, time, change, causation, substance, matter, form, and universals (among others). Despite the fact that they were all discussed by Aristotle in other works of his (including his *Physics*), these topics (and others more or less closely related to them) eventually came to be associated with that particular book of Aristotle's, in which they featured so prominently – a book whose Greek name is *Metaphusika* and whose English name is (you guessed it) *Metaphysics*.

If we take an etymological approach to characterizing metaphysics, then, we will say that metaphysics is the branch of philosophy concerned with a disparate collection of topics that happen to be associated with one particular collection of writings by Aristotle, namely, the collection that was published after Aristotle's *Physics*.

Unfortunately, this etymological approach doesn't give us a very satisfying account of what many take to be the most central branch of philosophy. It would be nice to be able to give a more conceptual, big-picture account of metaphysics. And indeed, as most metaphysicians will tell you, it's hard not to have the sense that the various topics within metaphysics do have something essential in common with one another, in much the same way that the various topics within ethics, or the topics within epistemology, have something essential in common.

Attempts to capture in a definition this 'something essential' that most metaphysicians feel unifies the various topics of their field often result in somewhat elusive pronouncements like the following: metaphysics is the branch of philosophy concerned with fundamental questions about the nature of reality.

<sup>1</sup> All of the works of Aristotle discussed in this chapter can be found in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*.

This big-picture approach, unfortunately, is not without its own problems. One main difficulty is that most branches of inquiry, including biology, economics, and history, are also concerned with reality. Perhaps, however, there is an easy way to deal with this problem: let us assume that we all have at least a rough idea of what philosophy is, and that we can safely assert that other reality-based fields, such as biology and so on, are not branches of philosophy.

That still leaves the problem of distinguishing metaphysics from other branches of philosophy, such as ethics and epistemology, which are after all also concerned with reality. But now we might be able to take a contrastive approach. Here's the idea. Suppose (as we have already) that we possess a rough idea of what philosophy is. Then we can add some helpful context to our big-picture approach to characterizing metaphysics by saying that there are three main branches of philosophy: ethics (the branch of philosophy concerned with fundamental questions about right and wrong and good and bad); epistemology (the branch of philosophy concerned with fundamental questions about knowledge and justification); and metaphysics (the other main branch of philosophy). In other words, we can characterize metaphysics as what is left over when you subtract ethics and epistemology from the core area of philosophy.

But what exactly is left over when you subtract ethics and epistemology from the core area of philosophy? We think a good way to answer this question is with specific examples. Here, then, are some of the topics that metaphysicians deal with: ontology (roughly, the study of being, including the attempt to come up with a list of all the main categories of things that exist); the nature of time; the mind-body problem (roughly, the problem of understanding the relationship between mental phenomena and the physical basis of those phenomena); the problem of personal identity (roughly, the problem of identifying the conditions under which an earlier person and a later person are one and the same person); the problem of freedom and determinism (roughly, the problem of specifying what is required in order for a person to be acting freely); the nature of the laws of nature, the nature of causation, and the nature of material objects (including questions about the relation between an object and the matter it is made of, and the conditions under which two or more objects compose a further object).

If the topics on this list aren't yet perfectly clear to you, do not despair. We will explore one example of an ontological issue (the existence of properties)

in some depth in Chapter 9 of this book. Each of the other topics on the list is the subject of its own chapter. So by the end of the book you should have a much clearer conception of what each of these topics amounts to. And then you will be in a position to appreciate our third approach to characterizing metaphysics, according to which metaphysics is the branch of philosophy concerned with topics like those listed in the previous paragraph.

Let us summarize our discussion so far. We have identified three different approaches to characterizing metaphysics. One is *the etymological approach*, according to which metaphysics is the branch of philosophy concerned with a disparate collection of topics that just happen to be associated with one particular collection of writings by Aristotle, namely, the collection that was published after Aristotle's *Physics*. Next there was *the big-picture approach*, according to which metaphysics is the branch of philosophy concerned with fundamental questions about the nature of reality. And finally, there was *the definition-by-example approach*, according to which metaphysics is the branch of philosophy concerned with such topics as ontology, time, the mind-body problem, the problem of personal identity, the problem of freedom and determinism, laws of nature, causation, and material objects (all of which will be discussed extensively in this book).

For the remainder of this chapter, our plan is to do three things. First, in 1.2, we will begin our metaphysical investigations with some basics about modality, especially the concept that philosophers call *metaphysical necessity*. This will permit us to discuss a topic that plays some role in almost every chapter of the book, and that also serves as a nice illustration of a conceptual problem in metaphysics. Then, in 1.3, we will introduce some basics about ontology. These two sections of this first chapter will let us demonstrate in a very introductory way some of the methods of the metaphysician. And finally, in 1.4, we will end the chapter by trying to set aside a common skeptical intrusion that you, the reader, would do well to resist.

## 1.2 Modality

Let's begin with a short list of some propositions that are widely accepted as being metaphysically necessary.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> We here 'list' propositions by displaying sentences that express the relevant propositions. In what follows we will continue to play fast and loose with the distinction between propositions and the sentences that express them.