

Metaphysics & Epistemology

Introduction

General information

Day/time: Thursday 18.15 - 21.00, NB2

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Main textbooks

Lowe, E.J. (2002) *A Survey of Metaphysics*, Oxford: OUP.

Ney, A. (2014) *Metaphysics: an introduction*, Routledge.

What is Metaphysics?

‘Metaphysics’: a historical accident—the classification of Aristotle’s corpus

Robin George Collingwood

metaphysics:

“to think in a systematic or orderly fashion about the subjects that Aristotle discussed in the group of treatises collectively known by that name”.

What is Metaphysics?

The kind of inquiry Aristotle called ‘first philosophy’ is logically/conceptually prior to physics and other sciences but historically/temporally posterior to them, since its very possibility presupposes the subject-matters of the special sciences, as sciences of the principles and causes of particular *kinds* of being.

‘First philosophy’ then studies the being *qua being*, that is the being stripped of particular scientific descriptions of it.

There is a science which investigates **being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature**. Now this is not the same as any of the so-called special sciences; for none of these others deals generally with being as being. They cut off a part of being and investigate the attributes of this part – this is what mathematical sciences for instance do. **Now since we are seeking the first principles and the highest causes, clearly there must be something to which these belong in virtue of its own nature.** (*Metaphysics* 1003a22–28)

Bundle vs Substratum

- Traditionally, there have been **two views** of how an **object** relates to its **properties**: the bundle theory and the substratum theory.
- The **bundle theory** says that an object is just a 'bundle' or collection of properties and nothing more.
 - > This view is popular with empiricists: in particular, Berkeley and Hume; though not Locke. Why is this? Well, if there were anything more to an object, we could not know of it, and nor could we form an idea of it. Thus, the postulation is meaningless.
- The **substratum theory** says that an object consists of a 'substratum' or 'underlying subject' in which the object's properties are 'exemplified' or 'instantiated'.

Bundle vs Substratum

I wou'd fain ask those philosophers, who found so much of their reasonings on the distinction of **substance** and **accident**, and imagine we have clear ideas of each, whether the idea of substance be deriv'd from the impressions of sensation or reflexion? If it be convey'd to us by our senses, I ask, which of them; and after what manner? If it be perceiv'd by the eyes, it must be a colour; if by the ears, a sound; if by the palate, a taste; and so of the other senses. But I believe none will assert, that substance is either a colour, or a sound, or a taste. The idea of substance must therefore be deriv'd from an impression of reflexion, if it really exists. But the impressions of reflexion resolve themselves into our passions and emotions; none of which can possibly represent a substance. We have therefore no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it.

The idea of a substance as well as that of a mode, is nothing but a collection of simple ideas, that are united by the imagination, and have a particular name assigned them [...]

(David Hume, I.I.vi, Treatise of Human Nature)

Bundle vs Substratum

-> The bundle theory seems to entail and be entailed by the following principle, due to Leibniz:

[...] it is not true that two substances may be exactly alike and differ only numerically [...]

(Gottfried W Leibniz, IX, Discours de Metaphysique)

-> It is known as the **Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles** (sometimes abbreviated PII).

-Leibniz derived it from the more fundamental **Principle of Sufficient Reason**: For any fact, there is a reason why that fact is true.

Bundle vs Substratum

Whatever therefore be the secret abstract nature of **substance** in general, all the ideas we have of particular distinct sorts of substances are nothing but several combinations of simple ideas, **coexisting in such, though unknown, cause of their union**, as makes the whole subsist of itself.

(John Locke, II.xxiii.6, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*)

Aristotelian metaphysics

The study the ontic categories and principles that constitute the '**nature**' of things and, in particular, the dynamical character of this nature, viz., its **power** to bring about certain natural behaviours.

The metaphysics of science has as its aim **to study the structure of natural necessity**.

Natural necessity is grounded in powers of things

“And what is capable of being hot, when what is capable of heating is present and approaches, necessarily becomes hot” (324b8)

A Medieval Split

Metaphysical necessity vs natural necessity

Scotus's principle: 'Whatever occurs in many instances by a cause that is not free, is the natural effect of that cause.'

But all general statements arrived at by means of this principle can be denied **without contradiction**. Actually, God could violate them if he willed to do it.

So general statements about powers are only '**naturally necessary**' and not **metaphysically necessary**.

Jean Buridan: “There is another necessity which is called ‘natural’, which is not necessity *simpliciter*, but which would be necessity with all supernatural cases put to one side”.

- **Natural necessity is *necessity enough***, provided God does not choose to intervene.

MoS is then taken to have as its subject-matter **the principles and ontic categories that are required for there being *natural* necessity in the world, barring God’s interventions—natural necessity without metaphysical necessity.**

Cartesian metaphysics

- **What is metaphysics?**

“Thus, all Philosophy is like a tree, of which Metaphysics is the root, Physics the trunk, and all the other sciences the branches that grow out of this trunk, which are reduced to three principal, namely, Medicine, Mechanics, and Ethics”.

(From the preface to the French translation)

Physics has a double grounding on first philosophy

Scientific knowledge by physics presupposes metaphysical principles which secure its possibility **and**

the natural world has an underlying ontic structure: **it is matter (qua substance) which is essentially characterised by extension (essential attribute). The world is inherently geometrical and inert.** Motion comes from the outside.

In Descartes, God is the bridge between these two roles of metaphysics within physics. He guarantees the knowledge of the world **and** he is the source of all motion in nature.

God **warrants** the fundamental laws of nature and their a priori knowability. From the **immutability of God** to the fundamental law of the conservation of the quantity of motion in the universe.

The three fundamental laws of nature are metaphysically necessary.

Cartesian metaphysics

From powers to laws

- Science investigates the mechanical structure of the world and **the laws of nature** by virtue of which things behave the way they do.
- These laws are **metaphysically necessary**, but some of them are known a priori whereas others are known only a posteriori.
- So: one kind of necessity (**metaphysical**) but two kinds of certainty!

“This therefore is the **essence of necessity**. Upon the whole, necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects; nor is it possible for us ever to form the most distant idea of it, consider’d as a quality in bodies.

Either we have no idea of necessity, or necessity is nothing but that determination of the thought to pass from causes to effects and from effects to causes, according to their experienc’d union”.

“uniformity forms the very essence of necessity”

An example in MoS: What is a law of Nature?

- A quick look at the current debate about laws of nature:

-> **Is there or is there not a law-making property?**

The ADT-approach (Armstrong-Dretske-Tooley) and **primitivism** (Carroll/Maudlin) think there is. But they disagree on what this is:

ADT: laws as necessitating relations among natural universals

Primitivism: Laws are ontically **primitive**—and **real**; the law-making property is **not analysable** in terms of non-nomic facts.

The Humean Approach and **Metaphysical Necessitarians** think there is not. But they disagree on why there is no need for it.

Humeans: Laws are, ultimately, regularities—what, ultimately, distinguishes them from accidents are various conditions of robustness (eg the MRL approach—they form a system etc.)

Metaphysical necessitarians (eg. dispositional essentialists, Mumford, Swoyer): laws ‘flow’ from powers

-> Are laws contingent or are they necessary?

-The ADT approach agrees with Humeans that laws are **contingent**—meaning, they characterise the actual world and not necessarily any other possible world.

-The Metaphysical Necessitarians of all stripes agree that laws are **metaphysically necessary**, meaning: they hold in all possible worlds (of which the properties from which they flow are denizens).

-> Are laws supervenient on non-nomic facts or are they not supervenient?

-The Humeans agree with most of the Necessitarians that laws are supervenient on non-nomic facts (though of course, they disagree among themselves as to what these facts are).

-And the ADT-view and primitivism align with the claim that laws are non-supervenient on non-nomic facts.

-Early **Logical Empiricism**: Eliminating Metaphysics

-> Metaphysics is **meaningless**. So metaphysical disputes are not not-factual disputes (in principle right or wrong about factual matters). They are **non-sensical**.

-> Verificationism as a weapon against metaphysics

-> Metaphysics has no subject-matter. It's a subject with no object!

Schlick:

Thus metaphysics collapses not because the solving of its tasks is an enterprise to which the human reason is unequal (as for example Kant thought) **but because there is no such task.** With the disclosure of **the mistaken formulation of the problem the history of metaphysical conflict is likewise explained.**

Carnap Elimination of Metaphysics

“The difference between our thesis and that of the *earlier antimetaphysicians* should now be clear. We do not regard metaphysics as "mere speculation" or "fairy tales." The statements of a fairy tale do not conflict with logic, but only with experience; they are perfectly meaningful, although false. Metaphysics is not "*superstition*"; it is possible to believe true and false propositions, but not to believe meaningless sequences of words. Metaphysical statements are not even acceptable as "*working hypotheses*"; for an hypothesis must be capable of entering into relations of deducibility with (true or false) empirical statements, which is just what pseudostatements cannot do”.

Carnap is against an error-theoretic approach to metaphysics. He is non-cognitivist about metaphysics.

Quine: Dissolving Metaphysics

Metaphysics is , by and large, **ontology** and takes ontology to be fully captured by an attempt to answer the question **‘What is there?’**. This kind of question is asked from within the scientific image of the world and its answer is given by Quine’s famous criterion of ontological commitment.

- ‘Metaphysical questions’ are just more general scientific questions. As such, **metaphysical disputes are factual insofar as scientific disputes are factual**. The truth of the latter is a function of the empirical evidence there is for them plus the operation of various theoretical principles (most notably simplicity).

Metaphysics has no distinct subject-matter and no distinct method. There are no sui *generis facts* that the metaphysics of science is supposed to study.

Carnap (1950) Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology

“The acceptance or rejection of abstract linguistic forms, just as the acceptance or rejection of any other linguistic forms in any branch of science, will finally be decided by their **efficiency as instruments, the ratio of the results achieved to the amount and complexity of the efforts required**. To decree dogmatic prohibitions of certain linguistic forms instead of testing them by their **success or failure in practical use**, is worse than futile; **it is positively harmful because it may obstruct scientific progress**. The **history of science shows examples of such prohibitions based on prejudices deriving from religious, mythological, metaphysical, or other irrational sources, which slowed up the developments for shorter or longer periods of time**. **Let us learn from the lessons of history**. Let us grant to those who work in any special field of investigation the freedom to use any form of expression which seems useful to them; the work in the field will sooner or later lead to the elimination of those forms which have no useful function. *Let us be cautious in making assertions and critical in examining them, but tolerant in permitting linguistic forms.*”

What is Metaphysics?

- > Metaphysics discusses **what kind of beings there are** and **how they are related** to one another.
- Metaphysics asks questions that are **more general** than those of the various sciences (e.g. “Are there properties?”)
- > perhaps the most precise distinction between metaphysics and the various sciences is made on the basis of **method**:
- > if a question can be answered by means of **empirical** research, it does not belong to metaphysics. But if a question about how things are can be tackled only by means of **philosophical arguments**, then it comes under metaphysics.
- > metaphysics also often tries to **analyse** (define) the **concepts** it uses (e.g. it tries to analyse the concept of causation)

What is Epistemology?

-> Epistemology discusses to what extent we **know** the things that (either in everyday life or in science) we believe we know, and to what extent we acquire **knowledge** by the methods (perception, induction, etc.) by which we believe we acquire knowledge.

-> Similar is the question to what extent our beliefs of various kinds are **justified** (e.g. to what extent beliefs based on induction are justified).

-In contrast to sciences such as psychology and physiology (which study e.g. perception and memory), epistemology has an **evaluative orientation**: it tries to evaluate whether the beliefs we form through those mechanisms constitute **knowledge** or at least are **justified**.

-Also, in contrast to psychology and physiology that carry out empirical research, epistemology (like all philosophy) is based on argument.

-> Of course, epistemology too, like metaphysics, often tries to analyse the concepts it uses (e.g. it tries to analyse the concept of knowledge).

Metaphysics: Some main topics

-> Causation and natural laws

-How can we define the concept of a cause?

-How can we define the concept of a natural law?

-What kind of entities can be causes and effects? Are they events or are they also entities of other kinds?

-Is it logically possible for the cause to follow the effect in time?

Metaphysics: Some main topics

-> Time and space

-Does time really move, or flow?

-Does time have a direction? What does that direction consist in?

-Is it logically possible for time to exist without there being any change?

-Could time or space exist without there being any entities (objects or events) in it?

Metaphysics: Some main topics

-> Freedom and determinism

-**Determinism** is the proposition that, for every moment t and every moment t' after t , the state of the universe at t fully determines how the universe will be at t' .

-‘Freedom’ in this context refers to **freedom of action** and of the **will** and is related to **moral responsibility** (if someone didn’t act freely, they are not morally responsible for their action).

-> The traditional question is: does man act and decide freely?

-But the most usual question in this area since the 20th century has been the following: is it logically possible that determinism is true and at the same time we are also free?

Metaphysics: Some main topics

-> Universals and particulars

> How does it come about that distinct objects are the same in some respect?

-Many philosophers consider that, in order to provide a satisfactory answer, we must accept that there are **universals**.

-Universals are properties that characterise many things, or relations that characterise many groups of things.

-> Other deny the existence of such things. If, in the end, they exist, what is their nature?

Metaphysics: Some main topics

-> Possible worlds

-In contemporary philosophy, we often talk about **possible worlds**.

E.g. instead of saying it could have been that all people were happy, we say that, in some possible world, all people are happy.

-> Are there possible worlds other than the **actual** one or is this only a picturesque way of saying what is possible and what impossible?

-> If there are, are they entities of the **same type as the actual world** and outside of it or are they a kind of entities **within** the actual world?

Metaphysics: Some main topics

-> Events

-It seems that, among other beings, there are also **events**: falls of objects, kicks, kisses, duels, etc.

-What kind of entity is an event? Under what conditions are an event x and an event y **identical**?

-According to one view, they are identical iff (that is, if and only if) they have the **same causes and the same effects**; according to another, they are identical iff they occur in the **same time and space**.

Metaphysics: Some main topics

-> Temporal parts

-We usually consider that **material objects** (like a ball or a mountain) **have parts in space but not parts in time**, and that is why a ball, for example, may exist **in its totality** (that is, all its parts may exist) during the whole time of its existence; it is **processes**, and not material objects, that have parts in time.

-The opposite view is that material objects, too, have **parts in time**, and that is why at no moment does a ball, for example, exist in its totality (since, at each moment, **some of its temporal parts are missing**). Which view is the right one?

Metaphysics: Some main topics

-> Personal identity

-If we have person x who exists at some moment t , and we also have a person y who exists at some later moment t' , under what conditions are x and y one and the same person?

-If, for example, we could destroy x 's body, but simultaneously transfer all the information (memories, ideas, etc.) contained in their mind into the brain of a new, artificial body, would x continue to exist (with a new body) or would a new person be created?

Metaphysics: Some main topics

-**Metaphysical questions in the philosophy of mind.**

-What sort of being is a **mind**? What sort of entities are **mental states** (e.g. pain, joy, beliefs) and **mental events** (e.g. decisions, inferences)?

-Are mental states and events physical entities (e.g. chemical reactions in the brain)?

Epistemology: Some main topics

- Scepticism.

-> Scepticism denies or doubts that we have knowledge, or even that we have justified beliefs

-The concept of knowledge

-Justification of beliefs.

-Perception

-Memory

-Introspection

-> The way in which we know what we ourselves believe, feel, etc.

-Induction

-> An inference is inductive when it moves from premises about **particular** cases (e.g. emerald a is green, emerald b is green, etc. — where a, b, etc. are all the emeralds we have observed) to a broader **universal conclusion** (e.g. all emeralds are green)

-> Are inductive inferences justified?

-A priori knowledge

-> We know something a priori when our knowledge **does not rely on empirical data**. Is there a priori knowledge?

-Naturalised epistemology

-> According to a view held by **Quine** and others, epistemology must be reformed so as to be included in the framework of natural sciences.

Outline of the first part of the course

1. Introduction: What are metaphysics and epistemology? A survey of those branches.
2. The problem of **universals**. What are universals? Do they exist? If so, where are they?
3. **Causation**. What is it for an event to cause another event?
4. **Freedom and determinism**. Is it possible that our world is deterministic and yet, at least sometimes, we decide and act freely?
5. **Personal identity over time**. What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for a person who exists at a time t and a person who exists at a later time t' to be one and the same?
6. **Necessity and possible worlds**. The concepts of necessary and possible. The ontology of possible worlds (mainly, D. Lewis's theory about them).

- substance - property
- inhere
- substratum theorists
- bare particular
- ontological categories
- universals - particulars
- Max Black
- substantivalists - relationalists
- Occam's razor
- δυναμις power
- nature

- essential - accidental properties
- metaphysics of science
- natural philosophy
- επιστήμη science scientia
- Francis Bacon
- induction
- a priori - posteriori
- moral certainty - metaphysical certainty
- metametaphysics