

## Chapter 1

# The Metaphysics of Existence

We humans live with understanding, conscious of both ourselves and other things. While we also live within limits determined by the past we inherit or the environment in which we are set, we nonetheless are aware of alternative ends at which we might aim and thus are able in some measure consciously to decide what we will be or become. Thereby, human life is a moral enterprise because understanding alternatives for purpose entails decision among them by way of an evaluation. In the history of Western moral and political theory, something similar to this view has often been advanced. Seeking a contribution to this tradition, the present work intends to clarify the most general basis for evaluating alternatives for purpose and to specify such evaluation to politics.

For many eminent Western thinkers, the question of whether human life and community have a most general evaluative basis and, if so, what it is has been central. Moreover, some who have formulated a supreme or comprehensive principle of human purpose have related life by way of evaluation to another aspect of human consciousness, namely, our capacity to be aware of the entirety and to ask about human life within the totality of all things. On many accounts, one expression of this capacity is given by religions in the human adventure, at least some of which explicitly represent in symbols and practices an understanding of the totality or of something said to be its ground and intend to mark the difference this awareness makes or should make to human life.

Another supposed expression of our relation to all things has occurred in the kind of thought and discourse typically called metaphysics, which purports to be theoretical thought about existence with

understanding in relation to maximally general characteristics of the entirety. For some thinkers, moreover, the principal importance of metaphysics consists in its service to religious representations. The former seeks critically to understand what must be affirmed in religious symbols and practices in order that awareness of the totality can make the greatest possible difference to human life. This work also seeks to clarify the importance of metaphysics for a critical understanding of morality and politics and, at least in that measure, for religion.

Metaphysics has been central to theoretical thought throughout most of Western history, even if how this kind of thought and discourse should be distinguished from other kinds of theory has been controversial. Within the modern era, however, doubt about metaphysics as a proper part of the philosophical task has become increasingly widespread, and contemporary philosophy, on the whole, continues to be profoundly suspicious of the metaphysical project, at least in what I will call its strict sense. Summarily speaking, metaphysics in this sense is critical thought about maximally general characteristics of existence or about existence as such. So understood, the enterprise is continuous with Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, a treatise given this name when those who collected his works placed it subsequent to his *Physics*. Aristotle famously called the object of metaphysical thought "being qua being," and I intend "existence as such" as an alternative designation of the same object. In using these terms to distinguish the metaphysical task, however, I mean both formulations in a minimal sense similar to Aristotle's first use of "happiness" in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it [the highest of all goods] is happiness . . . ; but with regard to what happiness is they differ" (1095a16–20).<sup>1</sup> As defining the science of ethics, in other words, "happiness" is a name, the meaning or content of which is precisely what the inquiry must explicate. Similarly, then, to call metaphysics critical thought about being qua being is not itself to endorse Aristotle's or any other particular account of how existence as such is properly explicated.

Still, continuity with Aristotle does pursue a kind of inquiry different from another sense of "metaphysics." I have in mind specifically Immanuel Kant's intention. Kant could title one of his works *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* because, for him, humans cannot know anything about reality itself or things-in-themselves. On his account, "metaphysics" in the strict sense is impossible, and the term properly designates thought about the necessary conditions of human subjectivity, that is, of theoretical and practical reason, understood to

be independent of any characteristics of existence as such. Something like Kant's alternative has been pursued by important subsequent philosophers. But many thinkers, especially in more recent decades, find attempts to explicate subjectivity as such no less problematic than critical thought about being qua being and thus use "metaphysics" to designate both projects, both of which they reject.

There is, then, another possibility, namely, use of the term in both senses in order to credit explication of both subjectivity as such and existence as such. On this third alternative, metaphysics is critical thought about existence as such and, as a specification thereof, about existence with understanding or subjectivity as such. Although very few during the past century have pursued this possibility, the present work seeks to reassert and redeem metaphysics in this twofold sense and, thereby, to clarify moral and political purpose in relation to the entirety. That doing so is decidedly uncommon reveals, on my accounting, how profoundly influential Kant's critique of metaphysics in the strict sense has been. By way of background for the present purpose, then, it will be useful to review briefly the traditional metaphysics Kant discredited and some of the reasons why he denied any such claim to knowledge.

### The Western Background

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* treats, among other things, the nature of "first philosophy" as a theoretical science. Telling us that "being" in its primary sense designates "the 'what,' which indicates the substance of the thing" (1028a15), he asks, specifically, "whether first philosophy is universal, or deals with one genus, i.e., some one kind of being" or substance (1026a23–25). If the former, then first philosophy asks about the common character of all substances and thus about "being" as common to every genus. "But if there is something which is eternal and immovable," Aristotle says, "the science of this [one kind of being] must be prior and must be first philosophy, and universal in this way, because it is first" (1026a10, 30–31). Here, we may note, movement is not simply locomotion but, rather, any change. A first substance is completely unchangeable and, therefore, is eternal and, in that sense, is first as "being qua being" (1026a32). Aristotle calls the study of it "theology" (1026a19). We are given, in other words, two possible meanings of first philosophy: on the one hand, study of conditions common to all substances and, on the other, study of the first substance.

In the course of his treatise, Aristotle pursues the inquiry in both senses, and many hold that he cannot be speaking consistently of a single science. If it studies what is universal because common to every genus, metaphysics cannot include study of an immovable substance. The reason is this: On Aristotle's account, movable substances are movable in all respects, that is, subject not only to accidental change but also to generation and corruption or substantial change. As completely unchangeable, the immovable substance is defined by negating movable substances in all respects, and hence the former has nothing in common with the latter. Aristotle seems to concede the point in calling theology the study of one kind of being. As the study of what is common to every genus, then, metaphysics is equivalent to physics, which studies all movable substances, and Aristotle also seems to concede the point when he says: "if there is no substance other than those which are formed by nature, natural science will be the first science" (1026a27–29).

But other readers, often within the Thomistic tradition, hold that both designations of "metaphysics" belong together systematically, at least in the sense that "physics" requires "theology." For Aristotle, as for Aquinas after him, "there are many senses in which a thing may be said to 'be,' but all that 'is' is related to one central point, one definite kind of thing, and is not said to 'be' by a mere ambiguity" (1003a33–34). Thus, for instance, substances and accidents are both said to be, but in differing senses, because the latter, unlike the former, are not "self-subsistent" or cannot "exist independently" but, rather, must qualify a substance (see 1028a14–30). Still, the difference is not mere equivocation, precisely because the being of an accident "is related to one central point," namely, to the being of a substance. But if "being" is equivocal in this way, the reading goes, so, too, is "substance," and the two designations of "metaphysics" belong together. All movable substances are said to be because they are "related to one central point," namely, to the first being or immovable substance. For Aquinas, as is well known, this articulates the world's dependence on a First Cause, "the beginning of things and their last end" (S.T. 1.2.introduction),<sup>2</sup> whose essence is its existence and whose being is completely eternal.

To be sure, one may still ask how movable and immovable substances can have anything in common and, therefore, how there can be a single inquiry called metaphysics. Aquinas not only concedes but also insists that we cannot speak literally (that is, univocally) of something worldly things and their First Cause have in common, and for this reason, metaphysics cannot demonstrate anything about the character or nature of God. To the contrary, first philosophy can

show only *that* there is such a being, in distinction from *what* it is, and in this sense, can demonstrate only the *existence* and not the *essence* of God. Nonetheless, this demonstration is sufficient to show the dependence of all worldly substances on a substance in another sense, the divine substance, and, in this respect, the subject matter of metaphysics includes both what is universal to worldly beings and the existence of the first being. Moreover, Aquinas can say that first philosophy also speaks of what is common to both, although such speaking is not literal but, rather, analogical, in the same way that “substance” designates in related senses both beings of the world and their First Cause. Worldly beings have in common with God “the perfections which flow from Him to creatures; which perfections are in God in a more eminent way than in creatures” (S.T. 1.13.3), and accordingly, our names for these perfections cannot predicate literally of God because “they fall short of representing Him” (S.T. 1.13.2).

Aquinas’s account of theistic analogies is the focus of a long controversy central to subsequent Western philosophical theology.<sup>3</sup> At present, the relevant point is this: both his proposal and, insofar as it is similar, that of Aristotle relate the two meanings of metaphysics only by asserting that literal designation of completely eternal and thus immovable substance must be by negation. “We reach a proper knowledge of a thing not only through affirmations but also through negations. . . . : through affirmations . . . we know *what* the thing is, and how it is separated from others; but through negations . . . we know *that* it is distinct from other things, yet what it is remains unknown. Now, such is the proper knowledge that we have of God through demonstrations” (S.C.G. 3.39.1).<sup>4</sup> As mentioned above, so much seems to follow from the fact that “immovable” is simply the negation of “movable.” This point is important because it helps to clarify Kant’s denial that metaphysical knowledge in the strict sense is possible.

For Kant, we cannot have any knowledge of God because, to use Aquinas’s formulation, we cannot through demonstration have such knowledge through affirmations. More generally, our possible knowledge of what exists is limited to what in literal terms we can designate positively. To assert, with Aquinas, the possibility of knowing God’s existence without knowing God’s essence is simply to posit the possibility of knowing what cannot be known. On Kant’s reading, metaphysics in its strict sense—Platonic, Aristotelian, Thomistic, Cartesian, or Leibnizian—invariably asserts that changeable existents presuppose or imply some existent or existents completely unchangeable (that is, completely eternal or absolute or unconditional), and, because such

an existent or existents cannot be designated in positive terms, the entire enterprise as an inquiry seeking critical knowledge is futile.

To be sure, this leaves available the idea of “first philosophy” in the other Aristotelian sense, namely, the study of what is common to all things in the world. As noted earlier, metaphysics in this sense alone would be, for Aristotle, equivalent to what he called physics; “if there is no substance other than those which are formed by nature, natural science will be the first science” (1026a27–29). But a science of things formed by nature cannot, for Kant, be the study of being qua being. Without relation to a necessary substance, he reasons, what can be studied by natural science depends on what just happens to be given in human experience, and nothing given in this sense could provide knowledge of features common to all possible existents. On Kant’s assessment, therefore, the tradition was correct at least in this: unless possible in both Aristotelian senses, metaphysics in the strict sense is not possible at all.

Whether or not that conclusion is correct, it may seem the more compelling given the view that sense impressions are the primary data in human experience of external objects. Kant accepts that view and, on its basis, finds Hume’s accounting decisive: natural scientific assumptions about universal features of its subject matter—for instance, the assumption of causal connection—are not present in or implied by sense impressions and, therefore, cannot themselves be known by way of empirical science. For Kant, then, an explication of nature’s universal features can only be a critique of theoretical reason, whose conclusions are in truth only about those necessary forms of sensibility and transcendental principles of human understanding by which “object as such,” the character of any object as it appears in human experience, is subjectively constituted—and in that critique, Kant effects his “Copernican revolution” and writes the “prolegomena to any future metaphysics.”

### The Necessity of Existence

Kant’s alternative metaphysics has been highly controversial. For some who pursue the so-called linguistic and hermeneutical turns, necessary features of subjectivity are no more accessible than are conditions of existence as such. But this further conclusion emerged, I judge, because Kant first forcefully articulated a subjective turn that released subjectivity from a larger metaphysical context. In any event, Kant’s argument against metaphysics in the strict sense has been massively

influential. No other single thinker, I venture, is so responsible for the profound suspicion with which contemporary Western philosophy views that pre-Kantian enterprise. Critical thought about being qua being or existence as such seeks finally to know what can be conceived only in negative terms, and thereby the entire project is discredited. So far as I can see, moreover, this conclusion is now widely taken to be so secure that it no longer needs critical assessment.

Nonetheless, this conclusion is, I believe, invalid, and metaphysics in the strict sense should be reaffirmed. We can approach an argument to this effect by noting that Kant's critical turn required his distinction between phenomena or things-as-they-appear and noumena or things-in-themselves. Given that universal features of experienced objects are known only because "object as such" is constituted by human subjectivity, things-in-themselves cannot be known. Kant does not deny their existence; he apparently holds that things-in-themselves are, in some unknowable way, the causes of our sense impressions. In addition, the existence of noumena is, for him, an inescapable postulate of practical reason; affirmation of our own freedom and, further, of God's existence are consequent on our experience of moral obligation. If we leave Kant's moral theory aside, however, his critique of theoretical reason itself at least implies that things-in-themselves *may be* different from appearances because, absent this possibility, the necessary features of phenomena would be metaphysical in the strict sense.

But this required distinction can be expressed only by speaking of things-in-themselves as not-phenomena. Since they cannot be experienced, we cannot describe their possibility in positive terms. Thus, if Kant deconstructed the metaphysical tradition he inherited, he still agreed with Aquinas in this: understandings or conceptions that designate by complete negation are meaningful or possibly true. To be sure, traditional metaphysics is impossible because we cannot *know* something whose designation is solely by negation (for instance, God or a thing-in-itself); but we can nonetheless *think* such a thing. Hence, whether one claims, with Aquinas, to know the existence of something whose essence is unknowable or affirms, with Kant, only that such things are possible, a thought having no positive content is said to make sense. This common ground, I now wish to argue, provides reason to reject both proposals and, at the same time, to reaffirm metaphysics in the strict sense.

So far as I can see, a putative thought whose content is completely negative is, in truth, meaningless. Here and subsequently, I speak of a thought as meaningless in a strong sense. Clearly, we might credit a thought with meaning whenever its supposed content



is in fact entertained and somehow related to other thoughts, at least if this occurs within a community of people. In this weaker sense, thoughts can be meaningful even if, on analysis, they turn out to be self-contradictory. Many have argued, for instance, that the very idea of God is, when all implications are considered, self-contradictory; but even if this conclusion is sound, one may still attribute a kind of meaning among believers to thought and speech about God. On my usage here, however, a thought whose supposed content is, in truth, self-contradictory is meaningless, and I will also speak of thoughts in this way when their supposed content is hopelessly vague. In sum, I use “meaningless” to designate a merely putative thought that, in truth, has no content, and in this sense, I will also call such a thought nonsensical. Any putative thought whose supposed content is completely negative is, I will argue, also meaningless because, in the end, such a thought cannot be distinguished from merely putative thoughts that, in truth, have no content.

Consider, for instance, the supposed thought of a colorless yellow thing. Although one may utter the words, the supposed thought is merely putative or meaningless. One may think of something colorless, and one may think of something yellow, but one cannot think of something as simultaneously colorless and yellow. The supposed thought has no content. Moreover, the supposed content is completely negative. Purporting to think of something colorless, one designates something as not yellow; purporting to think of something yellow, one designates the same thing as nothing other than something yellow; and “something not yellow and nothing other than something yellow” is a complete negation. Hence, if some other complete negation—for instance, “God” as Aquinas intends this term, or “noumena” as Kant intends that term—is to make sense, it must somehow be different from putative thoughts that have no content. In truth, however, there can be no such difference because the supposed content of each is completely negative, and a difference in supposed content must be positive. A supposed difference in content that is in no way positive is no different from no difference at all. Hence, a putative thought whose supposed content is completely negative is no different from a putative thought that is meaningless because it has no content.

Any putative existential thought whose content is completely negative implies that “nothing exists” is meaningful or possibly true. To first appearances, perhaps, this formulation seems foreign to both Aquinas and Kant. The former does not say that God is nothing, nor does the latter say this of noumena. Neither intends to assert the complete absence of existence but, rather, purports to think of some



necessary or possible existence that cannot be conceived in positive terms and thus must be designated as “that to which thought cannot attribute any positive features.” But whether one intends the sheer absence of existence or the possible existence of “that to which thought cannot attribute any positive features,” one asserts the following: a statement with the predicate “exists” and a grammatical subject having no positive content is possibly true.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, “nothing exists” is asserted, the supposedly differing uses notwithstanding.

Moreover, the same assertion is implied by every denial of metaphysics in the strict sense, given the following account of such metaphysics: true understandings of existence as such are necessarily true in the strict or logical sense; that is, the propositional content of their denials is self-contradictory or meaningless and, thereby, not possibly true. Throughout, I will use “necessarily true” only in this strict sense and “not possibly true” correspondingly. If one denies that any understanding of existence can be necessarily true and insofar agrees with Kant, one asserts, by implication, that “nothing exists” is possibly true. I wish now to repeat the argument against putative thoughts whose contents are completely negative by showing why “nothing exists” is meaningless. Summarily expressed, the argument is this: given that “something exists” is possibly true, where “something” means a grammatical subject whose content is at least partially positive, “nothing exists” cannot be possibly true because the two statements have no common content.

In pursuit of the point, we might begin with two other statements: “something lives” and “nothing lives.” Both are possibly true, but as such, “nothing lives” is not typically used to assert “there are no existents at all, and a fortiori nothing is alive.” Typically used, the statement asserts the absence of life under certain specified or specifiable existential conditions. For instance, one might say that nothing lives under the conditions present on Pluto. Given this usage, both “something lives” and “nothing lives” also assert “something exists”; that is, both statements are about existents—the first asserting that at least some among the existing things in question are alive and the second asserting that none of these things is alive. In this sense, we can say that both have “something exists” as a common content, with which each of the two, in its own way, combines further content. Typically understood, in other words, the predicate “lives” implies that any possibly true statement of the form “*x* lives” (including “nothing lives”) is an assertion about existents.

Now, it is apparent that a possibly true statement of the form “*x* lives” cannot have just any grammatical subject we please. For instance,

"this stone lives" is nonsensical, if we posit that "stone" designates a kind of nonliving existent. On that designation, the statement is not possibly true. Moreover, we can, assuming the typical usage of "*x* lives," formulate this conclusion as follows: any possibly true statement of the form "*x* lives" has the content "something exists," but "this stone lives" has no such content because the existence it asserts, namely, that of a certain living thing, is denied by designating the thing as a stone. On typical usage, then, a statement of the form "*x* lives" is meaningless when, by virtue of its grammatical subject, it contradicts the common content implied by the predicate "lives," namely, "something exists."

But some hold that "nothing lives" does not necessarily share with "something lives" this common content because the former may also deny "something exists." In other words, "nothing lives" may have no positive implications because its meaning is solely negative, namely, "nothing exists, and a fortiori nothing is alive," which, on this account, is also possibly true. We may now ask whether the predicate "exists" implies that "something exists" and "nothing exists" have some common content, and, if so, what it is.<sup>6</sup> Since the two differ because "something exists" is at least partially positive and "nothing exists" is not, such common content seems absent. Naturally, the position we are reviewing may deny that any common content is, in this case, required. Nonetheless, one cannot deny that, given some grammatical subjects, "*x* exists" is not possibly true. For instance, "A colorless yellow thing exists" is meaningless, as is any instance of "*x* exists" in which the grammatical subject contradicts itself. Accordingly, any possibly true statement of the form "*x* exists" must have the common content required to distinguish it from a statement of this form that is, by virtue of its grammatical subject, meaningless. But, again, "something exists" is at least partially positive, and "nothing exists" is not, and thus the position in question seems to preclude all candidates for common content in the two statements. To say that "nothing exists" is possibly true appears to imply what it also precludes.

Still, the position we are reviewing might insist that "something exists" and "nothing exists" have as their common content that "*x* exists" is meaningful. On this proposal, all possibly true statements of the form "*x* exists" commonly assert "something is possibly true"—and with this common content, each in its own way combines some further content. Because this is the only available proposal, we can now see why the position cannot itself possibly be true, namely, because the assertion of it must beg the question. Begging the question has been discussed by some as "a dialectical, or dialogical" feature (Oppy, 53)

of how arguments are used. On Graham Oppy's account, an argument fails in this way by including a premise that is contrary to some belief within a consistent set of beliefs held by the argument's recipient—for instance, in the case of theistic arguments, held by the atheist or agnostic (see Oppy, 53–57; see also Gale, 213).<sup>7</sup> In keeping with this account, we can say that a statement begs the question when it simply assumes something at issue. If we ask, for instance, whether there are universal human rights, a positive answer begs the question if it simply assumes the validity of Kant's moral theory.

In the present case, asserting as their common content the possible truth of "something exists" and "nothing exists" exhibits a similar failure. At issue is whether "nothing exists" is possibly true because it differs from meaningless statements of the form "*x* exists" by virtue of sharing with "something exists" a common content. Being possibly true, then, cannot be the common content required; to the contrary, something else is needed such that, given its presence, the possible truth of "nothing exists" would be established or confirmed. To the question of human rights mentioned above, the positive answer suggested may only happen to beg the question or may do so, we can say, contingently—if the positive answer can be given without simply assuming the validity of Kant's moral theory (or any other on which human universal rights are affirmed). In the present case, to the contrary, the proposed answer necessarily begs the question. Because the only available proposal for common content shared by "nothing exists" with "something exists" is being possibly true, the assertion that "nothing exists" is possibly true *must* simply assume precisely what is at issue.

Thereby, this supposed answer not only begs the question but is, by implication, self-refuting. Because it must beg the question, the position we are reviewing implicitly denies that the question itself is meaningful. In the sense relevant here, a question cannot be meaningful unless it has a true answer and thus includes or implies some basis or criterion for the difference between true and false answers. Perhaps we humans are, in fact, unable to determine the true answer (or answers) to some questions—for instance, certain questions about particularities of the past forever lost to memory or historical inquiry, or certain questions about the deepest motivations of a particular person. Still, a meaningful question must include or imply some way in which true and false answers are differentiated, even if we cannot, in fact, determine any answer thereby credited. Absent that differentiation, true and false could not characterize alternative answers, and the question could not be understood. But if we ask whether "nothing exists"

is possibly true, a response that must beg the question by assuming precisely what is at issue denies, by implication, any such basis for the difference between true and false answers. In other words, " 'nothing exists' is possibly true" must be nonsense because, by implication, it purports to answer a meaningless question.

Perhaps this argument will be indicted for a similar failure. The view that "nothing exists" is possibly true, its advocates may say, cannot be defeated without also begging the question or simply assuming something at issue, and the disagreement becomes a stand-off. But this response is without merit. What, we may ask, is the statement supposedly assumed? That "something exists" is possibly true is not a statement at issue. Rather, its possible truth is transparent because it is transparently true; indeed, any denial of it is pragmatically self-contradictory because the act of denial implies the existence of a subject. With respect to the relevant question, in other words, "something exists" and "nothing exists" have different standings; the possible truth of the former, but not of the latter, is given. The relevant question is whether "nothing exists" is also possibly true because it shares with "something exists" a common content.

If there is a statement supposedly at issue, it must be that "something exists" is necessarily true. This statement is indeed asserted by implication when the possible truth of "nothing exists" is denied, and the implied statement, it might be said, is simply assumed. To the contrary, however, this implied statement is not merely asserted but, rather, defended by showing that "nothing exists" has no common content with "something exists" (the possible truth of which is not at issue) by which the former could be distinguished from a meaningless statement of the form "x exists." In its own way, then, this conclusion simply repeats the conclusion reached earlier: there can be no relevant difference between a putative thought whose supposed content is completely negative (that is, whose supposed content is "nothing exists") and a merely putative thought that has no content at all (that is, whose supposed content is a meaningless form of "x exists") because the content of each is completely negative. Thus, "something exists" is the common content shared by all possibly true statements of the form "x exists." In other words, "something exists" is necessarily true.

It now follows that all possibly true existential negations are, by implication, partially positive existential statements. Because "nothing exists" is nonsense, saying that something is absent is saying that something else, whose existence excludes the first, is present. For instance, "dinosaurs do not exist" implies "something exists" and thus

implies that something other than dinosaurs exists under whatever conditions dinosaurs are said to be absent. Similarly, "Julius Caesar did not exist" implies that the relevant moments in Roman history were occupied by things or people other than Julius Caesar, and to say that something will not happen is to imply that some or other event incompatible with the first will occur. Indeed, it follows that every possibly true statement, whether explicitly about existence or not, implies a positive statement about existence. Were this not the case, some possibly true statement or statements would imply that "nothing exists" is also possibly true. Accordingly, possibly true mathematical formulations or, alternatively, statements about statements, if not themselves existential statements, imply (positive) existential statements—for instance, about possible states of affairs or possible states of human subjectivity. Necessarily, possibly true understandings are, at least implicitly, about something that did or does or will or might or must exist.

On my accounting, no decision in philosophical thought is more fundamental than whether or not "something exists" is necessarily true, and my hope is that subsequent chapters in this work will help to confirm this judgment. By way of anticipating the later discussion, however, I propose that a positive answer commits us to the following: the distinction some have drawn between ontological necessity, on the one hand, and logical necessity, on the other, is illicit. On some accounts, the ontological necessity of a given thing or feature of things does not entail the logical necessity of the corresponding statement "*x* exists" (see, e.g., Hick, 93–97; Post, chapter 3). In one application, this distinction appears in Kant's synthetic a priori principles of understanding. While they designate what is existentially necessary, because they constitute any appearing object as such, they are not logically necessary because they do not or may not designate the character of noumena. Again, the distinction has been used to discredit Anselm's so-called ontological argument for God's existence. It may be, we are told, that "God" as "that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived" is itself conceivable or logically possible and designates an ontologically necessary being, that is, a being possible in all logically possible worlds and thus not dependent on specific existential conditions; still, this does not imply that "God exists" is necessarily true. The only legitimate conclusion is "if God exists, God exists necessarily," and it may be the case that under all possible existential conditions there is no God.

But this critique implies that "God does not exist," said to be logically possible, is an existential negation without any positive

implication, since “all possible existential conditions” or “all logically possible worlds” otherwise remain the same independently of whether God exists or not. Hence, “God does not exist” is completely negative and, if the argument developed above is sound, is not possibly true. With that conclusion, it remains open whether God does exist, because an assessment of Anselm’s argument also depends on whether “that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived” is itself conceivable and does indeed designate a necessary being, and these questions will be postponed for later discussion. The point here is simply to discredit refutations based on the supposed distinction between ontological and logical necessity. As in Kant’s formulation of it, this distinction in all of its uses assumes that “nothing exists” is possibly true, because the sheer absence of what is (or would be) ontologically necessary is said to be logically possible. Against that assumption, the argument above seeks to show that “something exists” is necessarily true, and thus the distinction is illicit.

### The Task of Metaphysics

If “nothing exists” is not possibly true, we have grounds on which to depart from the metaphysics of Aquinas even while rejecting Kant’s denial of metaphysics in the strict sense. Neither the assertion, with Aquinas, of some completely eternal existent nor the assertion, with Kant, that metaphysics excludes knowledge of existence as such is credible—because both implicitly affirm, each in its own way, that “nothing exists” is possibly true. We are now also in a position to formulate a third alternative. Throughout this section, I will, unless otherwise noted, use “metaphysics” in the strict sense, and we can summarize the third alternative by defining the metaphysical task as follows: *metaphysics is the critical study of what must be the case because the complete absence of existence is impossible.* Or, again: *metaphysics is the critical study of what must be true because “nothing exists” is not possibly true.* Since the impossibility of complete nonexistence implies that something must exist, we may also say: *metaphysics is the critical study of what must be the case because something must exist.* Or, again: *metaphysics is the critical study of what must be true because “something exists” is necessarily true.* This means that all other true metaphysical understandings are necessarily true understandings implied by “something exists,” and, thereby, all true metaphysical understandings imply each other.

To be sure, one might allow that “something exists” is logically necessary and then conclude that little, if anything, follows from it. In



*Why there is Something rather than Nothing*, Bede Rundle argues in his own way that “something exists” is logically necessary. Asking “why?” disappears, he notes, if it demands an explanation and concerns a point where this demand “is seen to be misconceived” (Rundle, 185),<sup>8</sup> and he argues “that *something* is always presupposed when existence is affirmed or denied” (117). Moreover, he continues, “if anything exists, matter does; therefore matter exists” (109); that is “matter exists” is logically necessary and thus does not demand an explanation. This does not mean, he clarifies, “that everything is material” (166) and, specifically, he does not deny that mind or minds exist (see chapter 7). Rather, only matter has “the necessary independent existence,” such that anything else that does exist or might exist is inseparable from “material substance” (166, 130). Still, if Rundle agrees that something or other must exist, little else beyond the independence of “material substance” and a “spatio-temporal setting. . . broadly conceived” (129) seems, for him, to follow, so that metaphysics as critical study of those implications is a rather thin inquiry. But whether “something exists” has less or more significant implications is a question only metaphysics in the sense we have defined can answer. For the moment, then, we may set that question aside and proceed simply with the recognition that those implications, however extensive they may or may not be, are what this critical study pursues.

In that pursuit, we may speak of “metaphysical necessity” in two senses that also imply each other. The term means that certain conditions or characteristics of existence cannot fail to obtain or cannot fail to be exemplified; that is, such failure is impossible. Correspondingly, the term also means that true understandings of these conditions or characteristics are necessarily true, and their denials are not possibly true. Such understandings are logically necessary because metaphysical conditions or characteristics are ontologically necessary, and vice-versa. On my accounting, the metaphysical task as conceived by this third alternative is given classic formulation in Alfred North Whitehead’s definition of “speculative philosophy”: “Speculative Philosophy is the endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted” (1978, 3).

“Interpreted” here means that every element of experience may be so understood as to “have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme.” Moreover, “every element in our experience” does not mean merely “such items as happen to have been considered” (1978, 3) but, rather, those in all possible experience—and, since we can experience something simply by understanding it as a possibility, the items of all possible experience include all possibility, whether



actualized or not. This becomes apparent when Whitehead explicates “necessary”: “The philosophic scheme should be ‘necessary,’ in the sense of *bearing in itself* its own warrant of universality throughout all experience” (1978, 4; emphasis added).<sup>9</sup> No scheme could bear such warrant unless “universality throughout all [items of] experience” means universality throughout strictly all actuality and possibility or universality definitive of the possible as such. In other words, “necessary” means that the scheme of ideas or understandings is necessarily true. One might object that some possibilities may not be possible items of experience, and thus universality throughout experience does not imply necessity. But “the unknowable,” Whitehead writes, “is unknown” (1978, 4); that is, the supposed possibility of something we cannot experience (for instance, noumena, as Kant proposes) is a supposed possibility that, in truth, we cannot think.<sup>10</sup> The unknowable, we can say, is inconceivable, and on my reading, this is Whitehead’s statement that “nothing exists,” whether intended as a denial of all existence or the assertion of some possibility whose designation is solely by negation, is not possibly true. Hence, true understandings of what is universal throughout all possible experience are implied by all possibly true understandings, that is, are necessarily true.

“The philosophical scheme,” Whitehead continues, “should be coherent, logical, and, in respect to its interpretation, applicable and adequate” (1978, 3). “Adequate” is a criterion repeating that all possible experience and thus the possible as such is to be interpreted. “Applicable,” Whitehead says, “means that some items of experience are thus interpretable” (1978, 3) and is implied by “adequate”; an adequate scheme is a fortiori applicable. If I understand correctly, the latter criterion is added as a methodological counsel to fallible human thinkers who pursue the philosophical task. Clarity about application to at least some objects of experience protects metaphysical ideas, maximally abstract as they are, from being hopelessly vague and thus only apparently adequate. Indeed, a hopelessly vague notion is in no relevant way different from a notion whose designation is completely negative.

Applicability, we can say, means that each of the concepts marking true metaphysical statements as metaphysical meets one or both of the following conditions: (1) The concept designates a feature exemplified clearly in some object or objects of widespread human experience—and here it is assumed that the possible objects of widespread human experience include the experiencing itself as an object of self-consciousness. In Whitehead’s scheme, for example, the metaphysical concept “quality” designates a feature exemplified in

a perceived object of color (that is, the object as colored exemplifies the metaphysical feature), and the metaphysical concepts "relation to the past" and "relation to the future" designate, respectively, features exemplified in an experience of memory and an experience of anticipation. (2) The concept designates a feature that implies and is implied by a feature exemplified clearly in some object or objects widespread human experience. In Whitehead's scheme, for instance, the concept "relation to God" designates a feature that may not be exemplified clearly in widespread human experience but, in any event, is said to imply and be implied by, among other things, "relation to the past" and "relation to the future." In sum, phenomenological applicability, dependent finally on clear and widespread human experience, is essential to metaphysics. It is not a sufficient condition for the truth of a metaphysical statement, but inapplicability entails that metaphysical ideas are hopelessly vague.

"Logical" has, Whitehead says, "its ordinary meaning," and it serves in relation to the criterion of "coherence" a methodological function similar to that served by "applicable" in relation to "adequate." "Coherence" here has an emphatic meaning. It stipulates that ideas or statements in a metaphysical scheme, beyond being logically consistent, should also "presuppose each other so that in isolation they are meaningless" (1978, 3). True metaphysical statements in the strict sense are coherent in the emphatic sense that all implications of any one imply it; such statements are, all implications included, mutually implicative. This reasserts that true statements of this kind explicate what must be the case because the complete absence of existence is impossible, or what must be true because "something exists" is necessarily true.<sup>11</sup>

The criterion of coherence, we can say, repeats with respect to logical or conceptual form what the criterion of adequacy requires with respect to designation; that is, the criteria of adequacy and coherence are redundant; either, properly understood, defines the task of metaphysics. Adequacy means that every possible item of experience can be so understood that the general scheme is implied, and thus the concepts or statements of any adequate scheme must be, all of their implications included, mutually implicative; correspondingly, such mutual implication means that all true metaphysical statements designate features of all possibility, whether actualized or not. Hence, stipulating both criteria is also methodological in the aforementioned sense, that is, as counsel about how the inquiry should be pursued by fallible thinkers. A scheme that seems to be adequate can be properly criticized as only apparently so by showing that its statements are not coherent, and vice versa.

Some might propose that a set of statements about possibility could be coherent without being adequate, that is, without designating the possible as such. Given the emphatic meaning of "coherence," however, reflection shows this proposal to be mistaken. If there are true metaphysical statements, they will be implied by any possibly true statement; but a possibly true statement that is not metaphysical will designate the specification of metaphysical features to some but not all conditions or states of affairs and thus will not be implied by true metaphysical statements. Hence, any set of existential statements, one or more of which is not adequate, will not be a coherent scheme; at least one statement will have implications that do not imply it.

Because all true statements of this kind imply each other, the designation of any one, all implications taken into account, includes the designation of all others. In this sense, metaphysical truth and falsity characterize the whole system rather than individual statements. Correspondingly, the character of reality such a system seeks to explicate is an abstract singular. "Singular" here does not mean simple, in the sense that excludes differentiations. Rather, the point is that metaphysical differentiations must be self-differentiations, in a way similar to the self-differentiation of time into past, present, and future. In doing metaphysics, then, we pursue critical understanding of this single character by way of explicating its self-differentiations. In contrast to Rundle's account, on which the implications of "something exists" seem to be few, I will outline below a neoclassical metaphysics on which the self-differentiations of metaphysical necessity are extensive. If we assume that metaphysical explication requires this more complicated kind of scheme, then no set of self-differentiations can be final. Because our thought is inescapably fragmentary, the relevant metaphysical ideas depend in part on which distinctions are required for clear understanding by the subjects in question, given their historical context and the terms in which important philosophical problems are formulated. Hence, finality is prevented because alternative or further analysis may be required by another intellectual context in which clarity is sought.

It then follows that validation of claims to metaphysical truth can never be complete. Only the explication of all implications and a defense of their coherence as self-differentiations could fully validate any given metaphysical statement. For this reason, among others, this account of the metaphysical task is thoroughly consistent with the fallibility of metaphysical proposals. A metaphysical proposal is fallible not only because one or more of its concepts may be hopelessly vague or because there is incoherence among its explicitly formulated

statements but also because implications not yet formulated may, if explicated, disclose incoherence that is otherwise not apparent. Moreover, metaphysics may be especially susceptible to such errors because it seeks understanding of maximally abstract conditions or characteristics.<sup>12</sup> In the nature of the case, then, metaphysical discourse is always an attempt to formulate a more successful scheme than those heretofore proposed and requires comparative judgments about the relative success of alternatives.<sup>13</sup>

But if these considerations introduce caution, they do not mean that doing metaphysics is impossible. Were that conclusion implied, adequacy and coherence would not make sense as criteria of critical thought, and thus "something exists" would not be necessarily true. As the above defense of that necessary truth intends to illustrate, moreover, relatively more complete validation of some individual statements or sets of statements is possible, so that relative metaphysical success and thus metaphysical progress can be recognized, even if, in the last analysis, metaphysical systems, not individual statements, are true and false. Any given metaphysical statement or set of statements is validated by showing that its denial is not possibly true.<sup>14</sup> This argument, as we have noted, can never be fully explicated because we cannot exclude the possibility of further analysis through which the denial is so restated as to be possibly true. In some cases, however, arguments offered for a given metaphysical statement or set of statements may be sufficiently convincing as to warrant confidence that additional attempts to contest it will differ only verbally, so that validation is relatively complete. Accordingly, there are relatively good reasons to say that a true metaphysical scheme will include a statement or set of statements substantively equivalent to the one in question. On my accounting, "something exists" is one such statement.

Whitehead's definition of "speculative philosophy" is, I judge, destined to stand as an unsurpassed formulation of the metaphysical task. If "nothing exists" is meaningless, then some statements designate existence as such and do so because they belong to a system of such statements that is adequate and coherent. Following others indebted to Whitehead, I will call metaphysics so understood neoclassical and thereby distinguish it from the traditional or classical form Kant discredited, namely, an account of existence as such to which designation by complete negation is essential.

Kant, as we have reviewed, held that an existent designated by complete negation could not be known, even while he affirmed its possibility, and thus he restricted metaphysics to the conditions of human subjectivity independently of existence as such. As also mentioned

previously, many recent philosophers have rejected both classical and Kantian metaphysics without affirming the necessary truth of “something exists” and thus have remained committed, at least by implication, to the possible truth of “nothing exists.” Given that premise, along with the rejection of Kant, some philosophers restrict generalizations about possibilities to the contingent or empirical features of “such items as happen to have been considered” (Whitehead 1978, 3), in distinction from the metaphysical characteristics of all actual and possible items in experience. On my reading, John Dewey is one such philosopher. For Dewey, metaphysics is part of an empiricist “reconstruction in philosophy” (see 1957) and seeks “cognizance of the generic traits of existence” (1958, 113). Philosophy is properly empirical because “the standpoint and conclusions of modern science” are the consequence of “the most revolutionary discovery yet made,” namely, that what alone is “actually ‘universal’ is *process*” (1957, xiii). For modern science, the world is “infinitely variegated,” so that “change rather than fixity is now a measure of ‘reality’ or energy of being; change is omnipresent” (1957, 61). Hence, for Dewey, “generic” means “most general” in the sense of empirical generalization; metaphysics is empirical “thinking at large” (1958, 27), and there are no necessarily true statements about traits of existence.

So far as I can see, Dewey’s proposal is fundamentally problematic because, by implication, it undermines the possibility of empirical knowledge in the sense modern science typically purports to pursue. I have in mind understandings whose truth is independent of anything by which the individual or community who understands is distinguished from other subjects. In that sense, the truth of empirical understandings is universally true. Absent both metaphysical necessity and Kant’s alternative metaphysics, scientific pursuit of such understandings is impossible, as I will now try to explain.

The problem appears once we recognize the following implication: if “nothing exists” is possibly true, then any statement of the form “*x* exists,” where *x* is designated by complete negation, is possibly true. The latter follows because there is no way to distinguish among such statements, such that some would be possibly true and others not so, any such difference being positive. Now posit some set of empirical generalizations that is formulated and, so it seems, successfully tested—for instance, those in some version of relativity physics. The possibility remains that a set of features exclusive of those designated by these generalizations is, in truth, exemplified by some or all of the relevant existents or events because these features can be designated only by negation. Perhaps, in other words, the

formulated generalizations stand to the relevant existent or events in the manner Kant's theoretical principles stand to the noumenal sources of phenomena. Moreover, there can be no procedure for ruling out this possibility precisely because the contrary set of features can be designated only by negation.

At this point, one might argue for the kind of empirical knowledge in question by appealing to the kind of universality Kant himself defended: while we cannot deny a possible difference between appearances (and thus empirical formulations tested) and things-in-themselves, empirical understandings are nonetheless true independently of any distinctions among subjects because they depend on certain synthetic a priori principles, those necessary to the understanding of a rational creature who experiences in the way universal to humans. But Dewey cannot agree to this without introducing "fixity" with respect to objects of human experience and, therefore, violating his empiricism, so that his proposal implies the impossibility of empirical knowledge in the relevant sense.

Moreover, Kant's solution is also problematic for similar reasons. If designation by complete negation is possibly true, nothing that appears counts against the statement that other subjects do or could properly understand the things in question with a contrary set of synthetic principles—other subjects whom we, that is, "we" who understand in terms of some given set of concepts and principles, can designate only by negation. To be sure, Kant allowed the possibility of such beings but insisted that they are not human, that is, cannot understand by way of sense experience. In truth, however, this does not protect empirical knowledge whose understandings are universally true unless one posits an account of sense experience. If "nothing exists" is possibly true, nothing that appears counts against the statement that others have sense experience of a kind that we, that is, "we" who experience in accord with a certain kind of sense experience, cannot know. In other words, Kant's own proposal cannot yield synthetic a priori principles without positing an understanding of human cognition—and this is, so far as I can see, what Kant did.<sup>15</sup>

I recognize that this analysis of Dewey's empiricism and Kant's critique of theoretical reason is summary and cannot be fully convincing without extended further argument. But perhaps enough has been said to give initial reason for the following assertion: without metaphysical necessity, empirical thinking can occur only within some conceptual context by which the philosopher or the community of understanding is distinguished from other subjects. In this respect, the logic of Dewey's view leads to the critique of universal reason



by which contemporary philosophy is so widely characterized and for which some, who read Dewey as explicitly rejecting claims to universal truth, take him to be a basic resource. Whatever Dewey's own intentions, one can understand why, for instance, Richard Rorty appropriates Dewey's thought in presenting his own neopragmatism, on which "truth is not the sort of thing which has an essence" (1982, 162). Empirical generalization and, indeed, all other interpretation, becomes only what a given individual or group of individuals says is the case; that is, "truth" is "simply a compliment paid to sentences that seem to be paying their way and that fit with other sentences which are doing so" (1982, xxv).<sup>16</sup> Truth becomes merely "truth for me" or "truth for us." More generally, the critique of universal reason, however its presentation may differ from that of Rorty, holds that meaning and truth are circumscribed by, or dependent in all respects on, some specific location in the human adventure, with its inheritance of interpretations that are, to use Martin Heidegger's term, "thrown" into account. Although there are many meanings of "postmodern thought," most philosophical views that claim this name or can be plausibly designated by it have in common, I venture, this conviction.

On my reading, a critique of universal reason is so widely asserted or implicated in contemporary philosophy largely because thinkers are explicitly or implicitly persuaded that classical and Kantian metaphysics exhaust the alternatives. If the discussion to this point has been successful, that accounting is mistaken because it ignores the possibility of neoclassical metaphysics. But the course taken by most postmodern philosophy is not the consequence of simple oversight or neglect. To the contrary, the critique of universal reason is advanced on grounds that do or would also indict neoclassical metaphysics and thus constitutes a profound challenge to it. In my judgment, no expression of these grounds has been more influential than Martin Heidegger's, and the next chapter, therefore, will take up Heidegger's challenge.