

WHAT IS METAPHYSICS?

Transcendental Knowledge

Kinds of Knowledge

There is no straightforward answer to the question “Is metaphysics possible?” because there is no widespread agreement on what the term “metaphysics” refers to. To say that metaphysics is the “knowledge of the nature of reality or Being” doesn’t help much, for this formula leaves unspecified a number of characteristics, any one of which might lead us to accept or reject its possibility as a distinctive form of knowledge. To be able to answer this question in an intelligent way, therefore, we need some means for distinguishing and classifying different forms of knowledge.

We have at least an intuitive sense of what passes for a distinct form of knowledge, even if we may have difficulty in defining precisely what it is that establishes it as such. Distinctive bodies of knowledge have the trappings of professional disciplines. We find them in the departmental divisions of universities, in their course offerings, in the classification schemes of libraries and bookstores.

We customarily divide these subjects into “pure” and “applied” (or “theoretical” and “practical”). In my discussion here, I will consider only theoretical disciplines, passing over the “knowing” or “know-how” that is to be found in such areas as engineering, business, musical technique, athletics, carpentry, gardening, etc. It may be difficult to classify some

disciplines such as architecture or economics, but these grey areas should not prove to be a problem. If metaphysics is indeed a distinctive form of knowledge, it is a form of theoretical knowledge.

Among the major theoretical disciplines, we have at least: logic, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, history, literature, philosophy, theology and art, give or take a few. Is there a principle according to which we might group these subjects? One traditional division separates those disciplines that study the products of human behavior and its cultural artifacts (the arts and humanities) from those that study natural phenomena (the sciences). This division derives from a basic difference in the kind of objects that are known. In the discussion that follows, however, it will be necessary to invoke some distinctions that derive from more epistemic concerns, that is, with *how* such objects are known. There are three such pairs of distinctions on which I will rely in order to be able to answer more intelligently the question “What is metaphysics?” This taxonomy is in fact quite similar to that used by Kant in his *Prolegomena* (1950, 13), where he refers to a “science” being distinguished by “difference of object, or of the sources of knowledge, or of the kind of knowledge.”

Empirical and Non-Empirical

While metaphysics has often been associated with knowledge of non-empirical objects (an association I will examine below), such a knowledge would not be the only form that doesn't justify its claims by drawing on evidence derived from sense experience, for surely logic and mathematics would qualify. That is, we can establish the truth of many propositions in logic and mathematics a priori, without having to appeal to empirical fact.

Most other forms of knowledge (besides logic and mathematics), of course, rely on empirical sources of evidence, even if they do also sometimes or always rely on logical and mathematical reasoning to establish their claims. At the other extreme, there are those forms of knowledge such as the visual arts, music, and poetry, which rely on aesthetic perception and taste as sources of information. While some would quarrel with calling these areas “knowledges,” it is apparent that they too depend on empirical experience for their material. This distinction between empirical and nonempirical knowledge is one with which most if not all of the disputants regarding the possibility of metaphysics will agree, even if they would not agree precisely on which types of knowledge are to be classified in this way.

In describing a given form of knowledge as empirical, we need not require that each and every theoretical term in the body of that

knowledge be reducible directly to sense experiences of some kind. We can characterize the natural sciences as empirical even if we hold the view that many (even all) theoretical terms in these disciplines are not reducible in this way. For this reason, we can classify Kant as an empiricist as well as Hume. Further, equipped with mathematics and a complex system of formal reasoning, such empirical disciplines are able to infer the existence of entities and real conditions that may at present not be empirically known. They remain empirical, however, because experience is still required as a basis for the evidence of the claims they make; that is, while such hypotheses may not yet be confirmed, they have been constructed upon a foundation of empirical data.

Formal and Material

Given any class of objects, a *formal* determination or property is one that belongs to all members of that class, while a *material* determination is one that some but not all members possess. Thus, given a typical group of students in a philosophy class, formal determinations may include relative age (they're all young), residence (they all live in the same metropolitan area), and biological genus and species (they're all instances of *Homo sapiens*). Material differences may include gender, ethnic and economic background, height, weight, etc.

While “formal” and “material” have a variety of meanings, the sense I have picked out here is close to Kant’s understanding of these terms. For Kant too, “formal” excludes material differences.

A specific area of knowledge is often defined by its formal object. The formal object of botany is plants. Whatever material differences between plants there may be, each object of the botanist’s interest will possess the formal property that identifies it as a plant. Such formal and material determinations are arranged in elaborate trees of classification. What is a formal determination for one science may be a material determination for another: thus, while being a plant is formal for botany, it is a material determination of the objects of biology, for biology is defined by a higher, more general type of formal determination – the study of living things – of which plants is a material determination.

Every type of knowledge, it seems, is formal in some respect, for it would hardly qualify as a “type” at all if it did not study some class of objects each possessing the same characteristics. But a question that is important for the present discussion is: Are there any types of knowledge that are *completely* formal, that is, knowledges that are concerned, not with some subset of existing things (such as plants, planets, statues, laws, poems, societies, atoms, divinities, etc.), but with *all* things? Such

a knowledge would have no material content at all (it would seem); it would not need to specify or give examples of any of its “proper” objects. It would be able to rely completely on abstract symbols for its representations of objects, without having to indicate whether it was talking about plants, planets, statues, etc. Here again, it would seem that logic and mathematics qualify as purely formal knowledges. And if metaphysics succeeds in coming to know something common to *all* possible objects, then it too would be formal. In what follows, whenever I use the terms “formalism” and “formalist,” it will be in this sense of complete or pure formality.

Transcendental and Non-Transcendental

Determining a class of objects with some shared or formal property does not by itself establish a distinctive study or form of knowledge. I may select all plants (and only plants), for example, as the objects of my study, but this still leaves open the possibility that I may select some particular aspect of these objects on which to focus. I may, for example, be interested in them only as food sources or only as objects that may be rendered in watercolor. Each of these approaches is a *qualified* study of this class of objects. If, however, I study plants as plants, my approach is *unqualified*. An unqualified study of plants is interested only in what makes a plant a plant and in everything that makes a plant a plant, focusing on what is essential to the subject matter. Thus it is concerned with roots, stems, leaves, flowers, reproduction, growth, etc., and not with some subset of these essential properties. Further, such an unqualified botany would not take plants as physical or biological objects in general, for this is an interest proper to physics and general biology, not specific to botany.

A *purely* formal knowledge may also be qualified or unqualified. I may study all objects, for example, insofar as they have mass and size (supposing for the moment that there are no nonphysical objects), or only insofar as they are beautiful, or economically valuable to me, etc. Or I may study all objects in an unqualified way, that is, just insofar as they are objects. Does any such form of knowledge exist? Here again, we might argue that logic is unqualified as well as formal; yet there is also a strong tradition that takes metaphysics to be directed toward the knowledge of objects as objects (as Kant would say) or of being as being (as Aristotle would say).

Botany, as I have indicated, may be taken as an unqualified study of plants. However, just as I granted that such a science isolated some

formal property that defined its class of objects (plants and not anything else), but that in this discussion I would henceforth use the term “formal” to mean completely or purely formal (that is, including all objects of any kind), so too I will henceforth be concerned only with *completely unqualified* perspectives, that is, those in which (all) objects are taken only as objects. Rather than speaking of this perspective as “completely unqualified,” I will use the term *transcendental* instead. For Kant, transcendental determinations of objects were knowable a priori (1963, B25), and therefore were both *universal* (instantiated in every object) – which is to say *formal* – and *necessary* (determinations of objects as objects).¹ I will later propose, however, that we separate these two criteria, confining the term transcendental to determinations that are necessary or essential, but allowing for transcendental determinations that are material as well. The reasons for doing so will be apparent in Chapter 6.

The identification of transcendental determinations is necessary for any metaphysics. Does the fact that this is also how we may characterize the Kantian critical enterprise mean that Kant was thereby engaged in metaphysical analysis? In formalist Greek metaphysics, real material differences among objects were either denied or reduced to one or more formal determinations of such objects. (Everything was really “air,” or a mixture of the four elements, etc.). That is, formalism entailed reductionism. In Kant’s philosophy, only formal determinations of objects were necessary determinations of objects. Here too, while Kant did not “reduce” the material content of sense to the forms of sense and the forms of understanding, these material differences were excluded from his transcendental principles. It is in this respect that Kant embraced the formalism common in pre-Socratic metaphysics. I will explain all of this in more detail in Chapter 6.

The reduction of (contingent) material differences to (essential) generic form, or the exclusion of such differences from such essential determinations, is the defining characteristic of metaphysical formalism. Yet there is another, distinctive type of reduction in which apparently substantial physical individuals are reduced to some sort of common physical “stuff” out of which they are composed. This is certainly present in the reductionist programs of a number of pre-Socratic and contemporary materialists. Here it is not *differentiation* that fails to qualify as a transcendental determination, but *individuation*. While I have focused so far on the former type of reductionism and have used the terms “formalism” and “essential difference” with that type in mind, I want to extend “formalism” to cover this second type as well. After all, to judge that two individuated physical entities are really nothing but the

(non-individuated) matter out of which they are made is itself a commitment to the idea that what makes such entities real is this *common* physical material, and it is this commonality that empowers formalism. Nevertheless, there are also important differences between differentiation and individuation – differences that I will begin to clarify when we come to consider Aristotle’s account of these two types of reductionism.

Many contemporary books on metaphysics describe their subject matter as “being in general” or “reality in general.” By this I am supposing they mean that their subject matter is transcendental in the way I have described. Yet this can be a very misleading characterization if they mean, in addition or instead, that their subject matter is formal, that is, that their investigation will focus on what it is that all entities have in common. It is the thesis of this book, as I have said, that these two characteristics are not only distinct, but can also be separated.

With these three pairs of distinctions, we are in a position to consider the possible place of metaphysics relative to other, more recognized types of knowledge.

Characterizing Metaphysical Knowledge

Those philosophers who have rejected the possibility of a distinctive metaphysical knowledge have sometimes argued (in the spirit of Hume) that all knowledge naturally divides into two types: that which is *non-empirical, formal, and transcendental* (such as logic and mathematics); and that which is *empirical, material, and non-transcendental* (all empirical knowledge, including the arts, the humanities, and the natural sciences). If metaphysics exists, it has been argued, it must find a home in one or the other of these two classifications – there is no third possibility. This is the fork offered by Parmenides and by Hume.

Why isn’t a third classification possible? The argument is that it is no accident that knowledge that is nonempirical (understanding this as a priori in this context) is simultaneously formal and transcendental. What we know a priori obviously cannot include information about properties or determinations that only some objects possess, for these determinations can only be known from actual experience. This is also the reason why I can know objects a priori only as objects and not as anything else, for this “anything else” also depends on material differences in my experience. Empirical knowledge, on the other hand, is marked both by its non-transcendental standpoint and by its materiality. If metaphysics exists, so this argument goes, it must either be like logic

and mathematics, making no claim about the existence of special objects, or, if it wants to make such claims, it must be fitted into the mold of the natural sciences, so that it must both rely on empirical evidence and also give up its hope for a transcendental perspective.

What other kind of knowledge could there be? Let us consider possible disciplines whose subject matter combines in some other way the terms of the three pairs of distinctions I have reviewed. There are a total of eight possibilities (including the two standard types).

- ("E" and "NE": "empirical" and "nonempirical")
- ("M" and "F": "material" and "formal")
- ("T" and "NT": "transcendental" and "non-transcendental")

- (1) NE-F-T: (e.g., logic)
- (2) E-M-NT: (e.g., empirical science)
- (3) NE-F-NT
- (4) E-M-T
- (5) NE-M-T
- (6) E-F-NT
- (7) NE-M-NT
- (8) E-F-T

Do the possibilities (3) through (8) offer any hope for a distinctively new type of subject matter?

The perspectives in (3) and (6) (where our subject matter comprises all objects, but not understood in a transcendental way) are interesting. We might, for example, consider all objects in so far as they are of economic value. Or we could take all objects to be judged in terms of their beauty.² Yet some medieval philosophers included "beauty" along with "being" (and perhaps also "unity," "goodness" and "truth") as transcendental concepts and thus as co-extensive with each other. This would elevate aesthetics to the level of metaphysics – unless one were to argue that these other concepts really derive from "being." It is thus open to question whether we should take such co-extensive concepts (if, that is, they can be treated this way) as "non-transcendental" at all. Either way, this is an option that remains open as we inquire further into these possibilities. Let us try to narrow the field a little more.

Let's next consider (7). Here, the subject matter would be similar to that of the natural sciences, except that the objects involved would not be empirically detectable. We would possess some special nonempirical access to this domain of existence. Is this what theology (or at least some types of theology) claims? Perhaps. Yet it is important to note that philosophical theology (in Aristotle and Aquinas, for example) is inseparably tied to a transcendental standpoint. Here in (7), on the other hand, the nonempirical objects which are the object of this knowledge

are known non-transcendentally, as if this “science” were quite like the other sciences, except for the nonempirical nature of these special objects. Perhaps some “spiritualist” philosophies would take themselves as sciences of this sort. This is not, needless to say, where we should look for a home for metaphysics, despite the fact that there are bookstore sections labeled “Metaphysics and the Occult,” where one might find discussions, not so much of objects as objects, but of astral projection, disembodied spirits, etc.

It might be argued that abstract entities, like Platonic forms or numbers, exist. Yet if this view insists on a non-transcendental perspective, then these entities would have to be treated in the way that physics treats physical entities; and so it might be comparable more to a science than a metaphysics.

What about (8)? This, I think, is what Kant understood to be the alternative to Hume’s fork and the basis for a legitimate “metaphysics.” Like logic, this form of knowledge is both formal and transcendental, but with an empirical (or more correctly, a sensory) component. Kant’s a priori forms of space and time qualify, while his “metaphysical” principles of natural science require the empirical concept of “matter.” I will have more to say about Kant’s proposal for this distinctively third type of knowledge in Chapter 6, where I argue that it fails to avoid the formal reductionism that threatens any metaphysics.

This leaves (4) and (5). In fact, I will argue that these two represent the best hope for a distinctively metaphysical subject matter. What is unique in each is the combination of a transcendental perspective with materiality of content, an approach found in both Aristotle and Hegel (as we shall see in Chapters 4 and 7). It rejects formal reductionism, where formality of content trumps material differentiation. In the end, I prefer (4) to (5), for I think it plausible to pursue a physicalist metaphysics as far as we can, to see if it is sufficient, before being forced to admit (perhaps by the need to explain mental phenomena, for example) the existence of nonphysical entities. That is, it is (4) that represents a genuine type of knowledge qualitatively different from either (1) or (2) and that offers the best foundation for a contemporary metaphysics.

The key to the viability of such a knowledge is to be found in its commitment to the idea that some differences among existing objects are not contingent and extraneous to our understanding of the object as object, but are essential to that understanding. This rejection of the formalist assumption and the possibility of *essential difference* will be explored in the chapters that follow.

The Possible and the Actual

There is another general characteristic of metaphysical knowledge that needs to be considered before we begin. This pertains to its relation to formal logic. Logic (even modal logic) is concerned only with the realm of the possible, and makes no existential claims. Yet this may suggest that metaphysics, in trying to understand how and why it is that what actually exists in fact exists, will have to invoke reasons “beyond logic” – if, that is, there can be any such reasons.

The underlying conditions that make either actual existence or actual knowledge possible have been variously described: a non-individuated material substratum; a network of physical laws; the a priori forms of space and time; an undifferentiated summum genus such as Being or Unity. Yet whatever these conditions are taken to be, it is clear that their function is to provide a basis for real relations among individuated and differentiated actual entities. Without such a basis, we would be left with a metaphysical atomism of entities, events, states, differences – all simply given and essentially inexplicable. What all such conditions have in common is possibility itself; actual states are related and acquire a rationale insofar as they are actualizations of this foundational possibility. It is this “conditioning” perspective that animates formalism and predisposes it to a reductionist attitude toward actually existing material differences.

On the opposite side, of course, are all those philosophies that are skeptical of the reality of anything beyond particular actual states, be they concepts, universals, rules, relations, physical laws, space and time, matter, “being” or possibility itself. These are the ontological and epistemological atomisms that remain staunchly anti-reductionist and, as a consequence, are usually unable to provide any explanation at all for actual states of affairs. Bertrand Russell (1956, 40) struck this contrast between reductionist monism and atomist pluralism very concretely: “Hegel had maintained that all separateness is illusory and that the universe is more like a pot of treacle than a heap of shot. I therefore said, ‘the universe is exactly like a heap of shot.’”

This opposition between reductionism and atomism, drawing its force from the distinction between what is possible and what is actual, is perhaps the original source of the division between the “One and the Many” from which metaphysical theory first arose. In what follows, I hope to show how we may avoid both extremes.

To provide some classical perspective for this general problem, it is instructive to compare Kant’s and Hegel’s view of the place of logic within their respective systems. For Kant, logic focuses on the nature

of the forms of judgment and reasoning, that is, on conceptual analysis and inference. Logic is separated from his critical philosophy in that the intuitions of space and time, although they are a priori and formal, nevertheless, because of their sensuousness, remain beyond the reach of purely logical inquiry. While it is true, therefore, that the aim of Kant's critical enterprise is to uncover the principles that make empirical knowledge *possible*, this critical focus on possibility does not render that enterprise a purely logical one, for his method requires that we first acknowledge the empirical *actuality* of this knowledge and then work backwards to the conditions for its possibility.

For Kant, therefore, both empirical knowledge itself and the synthetic a priori principles that make that empirical knowledge possible are beyond merely logical possibility. His use of the term "metaphysical" in his "metaphysical principles of natural science" means not only that they provide a necessary foundation for Newtonian science, but also that they provide more than purely logical possibility, for they are incomprehensible apart from sensory experience. Yet the sensory conditions for any empirical experience, while extra-logical, are not ipso facto *actual*, for these forms of intuition require the empirical matter of sense to provide that actuality. That is, there are two species of possibility that Kant associates with the a priori: one logical and one sensuous.

For Kant, to know what is actual is to know the matter and not only the logical and sensuous forms of cognition. What is it that lies beyond the *logical* forms (the a priori concepts)? While we might be tempted to say "actual existence," Kant rejected the knowability of that existence outside of empirical experience. That is, he identified the matter of the logical forms of cognition with experienceable content – the intuitions of sense. And what is it that lies beyond the *sensuous* forms (the a priori intuitions of space and time)? The actual matter of sense. Yet this matter is entirely contingent. For Kant, therefore, to know what is actual is either impossible (if "actual" refers to objective existence beyond empirical experience) or confined to what is contingent (if "actual" relies on the matter of sense). Necessary knowledge is locked, as it were, within the confines of the possible/formal. Yet because so much of the empirical knowledge achieved by natural sciences such as biology nevertheless appears to be more than contingent in nature, Kant struggled to see how it could be treated adequately within his formalist standpoint.

Hegel, on the other hand, abandoned the formalist principle and freely incorporated categories such as "chemism" and "life" into his logic. I will argue, however, that this posed a different problem for him, for if this logic contains the wealth of materially differentiated categories he

claimed for it, then the metaphysics which lies beyond logic will appear as a gratuitous replication of the material content of the logic. That is, for Hegel, as for Kant, logic (whether Kant's relatively austere form or Hegel's richer, more differentiated version) threatened to provide all the essential substance there can be for anything metaphysical.

It is not my intention at this point to examine this issue in Kant and Hegel prematurely, but only to point out that one of the most difficult questions relating to the nature of metaphysics is how, in principle, it can add anything to the structures of necessity and possibility provided by formal logic and/or by a formal critical philosophy. If metaphysical principles are more than either logical or synthetic a priori principles, and if it is these latter principles that underlie the rational necessity of what we know to actually exist, then is the fact that we are faced with *this* actual existence rather than another possible existence something that is rationally explicable? Or, in falling beyond the possible (formal), is actual existence *as* actual in principle unintelligible?

This is a question pondered more than once in the history of metaphysical thinking. We find it in the response to Anselm's ontological argument. We find it in Thomas Aquinas' characterization of *existence* (in contrast to logical *essence*) as "accidental" and "unintelligible," and also in the related problem of the nature of the Divine Ideas which, rather like Hegel's logical categories, seem to be fully differentiated even before they are embodied in actual existence. We find it in Leibniz's appeal to the goodness of God, rather than to his rationality, to explain why this of all possible worlds should exist. We find it in Kant's observation that while the physical laws of nature ("mechanism") are necessary to explain the structure of a bird, the fact that this actual biological structure should exist rather than another cannot in principle be explained through physical laws alone. We find it in the problem Hegel faced in providing more than duplicative differentiation in his philosophies of nature and spirit, once his logic had already provided what appears to be all the differentiation necessary to comprehend what is rational in real existence. We find it in Bergson, Peirce, and other process philosophers who held that mechanism and necessity cannot account for the actual variety that only a creative "vital impulse" or spontaneous "chance" can generate. And we find it in a new self-conscious form in twentieth-century existentialism, where the freedom associated with actual existence is presented as necessarily non-rational and non-intelligible – this, in response to the restricting essences of reason.

The reductionist consequences of formalism are thus closely connected to the idea that what lies "beyond the possible" may be inexplicable. I will return to almost all of the above itemized forms of the problem

of the relation between the possible and the actual in the chapters that follow. Further, I will argue that it is the non-derivability of the actual from the possible that in fact provides the basis for a non-reductionist contemporary metaphysics of emergence.