

METAPHYSICS

The Philosophical Investigation of Ultimate Reality

Of all the subdisciplines of Philosophy, Metaphysics is perhaps the most diverse in subject matter as well as esoteric in content. Like most of the technical vocabulary in Philosophy, the term ‘metaphysics’ is derived from a combination of Greek words: ‘*meta*’ (meaning, ‘about’ or ‘after’) and ‘*phusis*’ (meaning ‘nature’). But unlike most of the vocabulary we’ve encountered in our study of Philosophy, knowing the components of the word ‘metaphysics’ does not give us clear insight into the subject matter of this area of Philosophy. That is because the word was coined by scholars during the translation and editing of the rediscovered works of Aristotle. They invented the word to refer to a particularly difficult and esoteric part of Aristotle’s writings that came *after* his work on *nature* (physics). Thus, the term was originally meant to identify the location of a set of questions in the Aristotelian corpus, not to identify a particular subdiscipline of Philosophy. However, the term came to be used by subsequent philosophers to identify a specific *kind* of problem—the ultimate nature of reality—and continues to be used by philosophers in that way to the present day.

Thinking of Metaphysics as a part of the academic discipline of Philosophy, we can adopt, as a conventional definition, that it is the critical or rational investigation into the first principles or most basic questions regarding reality. That is, Metaphysics investigates what actually exists, what might exist, and what cannot exist. Using this kind of division, we can outline some of the general topics in Metaphysics.

Ontology – the philosophical investigation of existence (or *being*).

Monism – there is only one kind of existence:

Materialism – everything that exists is made of material substance

Idealism – everything that exists is made of ideal/mental substance

Dualism – there are two kinds of existence: mind *and* matter

Pluralism – there are many (three or more) kinds of existence

Examining the nature of existence has obvious similarities to other academic disciplines, most notably Physics. The difference between the scientific investigation of ultimate reality and the philosophical one has to do both with methodological and substantive assumptions. Physics assumes, as a point of departure, that all reality is material in nature and can only be identified via the scientific method (i.e., applied Empiricism). Ontology, on the other hand, uses the logical method of argumentation, and makes no assumptions about what it is that ultimately exists. So, while they are related, and even overlap in some areas, they are distinct.

Beyond investigating the nature of existence (*is-ness*), Metaphysics is also interested in investigating *how* existence exists. It has long been recognized by philosophers that we can distinguish between *necessary* and *contingent* existence. That is, some things exist in a way that is changeable (i.e., contingent) and others things are not changeable (i.e., they are necessary). As a very simple

example, we can recognize that there is a difference between a particular dog and the idea *of* dog (i.e., *dog-ness*). While a particular dog is born, lives, then dies (i.e., comes into then goes out of existence), the idea or nature of what a dog *is* does not change in the same way. The essence of what a dog is remains constant while an individual Chihuahua is remarkably different from an Akita. Philosophers refer to the thing that is constant or necessary as a ‘universal’—the one that stands over the many. Recognizing this distinction leads us to another area of investigation in Metaphysics: the nature of universals.

Whether or not universals exist is an ontological question. But if we grant that they exist in some sense, philosophers want to know how they exist. This leads to two very different views of the nature of universals:

Realism – universals are ontologically *independent*

Nominalism – universals are *dependent* on something.

But universals are not the only kind of unusual thing that Metaphysics investigates. There are many other things, generally categorized as *abstract entities*, which metaphysicians are keen to analyze and understand. Some of these diverse and abstract things are Time, Space, Causation, Change, Relation, and Identity.

Other areas of philosophical investigation that fall within the broad subdiscipline of Metaphysics are God and consciousness. These form their own unique sub-subdisciplines in Metaphysics: the Philosophy of Religion (i.e., what is the nature of divinity and its relationship to the universe) and the Philosophy of Mind (i.e., what is the nature of consciousness).