



QUESTIONS
IN CHRISTIAN
PHILOSOPHY

WHAT IS REALITY?



AN
INTRODUCTION
TO METAPHYSICS



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SERIES INTRODUCTION

QUESTIONS IN CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY

JAMES K. DEW JR.
AND
W. PAUL FRANKS

C. S. Lewis once remarked, “Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy must be answered.”¹ About that he is surely right. Unfortunately, many today are in the same position as those Americans Alexis de Tocqueville described in 1835: “They possess, without ever having taken the trouble to define its rules, a certain philosophic method which is common to all of them.”² That is, many people today have embraced, often without even realizing it, an approach to knowing reality that undermines their ever coming to truly understand it. They draw inferences about everyday life, theorize about major events and developments in the world, and do all of this while blindly utilizing philosophical categories and tools. In other words, they’ve embraced a “philosophic method” that generates “bad philosophy.” The cure is not to reject philosophical discourse altogether but to embrace good philosophy.

Thankfully there is more to good philosophy than simply answering bad philosophy. It also enables one to entertain questions that are central to one’s

¹C. S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” in *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, [1949] 2001), 58.

²Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of De la démocratie en Amérique*, vol. 3, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), 699.

worldview—questions related to the nature of truth, the nature of goodness, and the nature of beauty. However, finding examples of those doing philosophy well can be difficult. Yet, given the importance of questions we are interested in, doing philosophy well is critical.

For this reason, a contemporary introductory series to the major questions in philosophy is incredibly valuable. IVP Academic's Questions in Christian Philosophy series seeks to meet that need. It provides introductory volumes on the various branches of philosophy for students with little or no background in the discipline. Our authors have written their volumes with their students in mind. They don't presume prior philosophical training but instead provide careful definitions of terms and illustrate key concepts in ways that make philosophy tangible and useful for those who need it most. After all, it is not just professional philosophers who seek answers to philosophical questions—anyone attempting to love God with their mind will find themselves asking questions about the world God has created and seeking answers to them.

The authors have also approached their volumes in a way that takes seriously the claim that all truth, goodness, and beauty is found in God. That is, in undertaking Questions in *Christian* Philosophy, the authors are not merely engaging in these philosophical pursuits and then adding Jesus to the mix when they're done. Instead, they are pursuing these questions out of a love and devotion to Jesus that not only guides the questions asked but also motivates attempts to answer them.

It is our hope that each volume in this series will not only help readers become acquainted with various approaches to important topics but will also encourage people in their devotion to our Lord.

1

WHAT IS METAPHYSICS?

In this first chapter I want to introduce you to several prominent characterizations of metaphysics, both past and present. What exactly *is* metaphysics? What are the distinctive aims of metaphysical inquiry that set it apart from other areas of inquiry like the natural sciences and theology?

After we get an initial handle on metaphysics in this chapter, we'll turn in chapter two to explore whether genuine metaphysical discoveries are indeed possible. I'll guide you through several well-worn historical and contemporary criticisms of metaphysics and argue that no matter how hard you might try, metaphysical inquiry is unavoidable and conceptually necessary. Wherever you run, metaphysics will find you. If so, we'd better learn how to do metaphysics well as distinctively Christian philosophers (chap. 3). So, let's get to it already!

WHAT IS METAPHYSICS, EXACTLY?

As my first metaphysics professor and friend J. P. Moreland likes to say, metaphysics currently has a bad public relations problem. Before we attempt to unpack what metaphysics is and how it has been understood by several influential historical and contemporary practitioners, let's briefly reflect on a common misconception of metaphysics as a systematic area of philosophical study.

Every budding philosopher studying metaphysics has the firsthand experience of that look of sheer puzzlement or terror when they mention to their immediate family (or better, their in-laws) at the Thanksgiving table that they are enrolled in a metaphysics course. "You're studying *what?*! How can a Christian institution offer a class on the paranormal?" Alternatively, one might try taking a leisurely stroll through the metaphysics section at a brick-and-mortar

bookstore (if you can find one!) and see what I mean when I say that metaphysics has a bad public relations problem. In fact, it's a custom of mine to head straight to the metaphysics section whenever I visit a new or used bookstore; I just can't contain my curiosity as to what awaits me. Without fail, my eye quickly lands on book titles (real titles, I might add!) such as *Metaphysics of Astrology: Why Astrology Works*; *The Top Ten Things Dead People Want to Tell You*; *Crystal Skull Consciousness*; and so on (I could go on, really). I recall an instance several years ago when I was delightfully hunkered down, surrounded by stacks of old dusty tomes at one of my all-time favorite used bookstores in my hometown of San Diego, California. As I was browsing the titles in the philosophy section, back turned toward the door, I heard a woman enter the store and ask the clerk for the "metaphysics section." As a philosopher, of course, my ears perked up and I immediately thought: *Absolutely splendid! Another aspiring metaphysician looking to go deeper in the quest to understand the fundamental nature of reality. I wonder if she's majoring in philosophy at San Diego State University. Perhaps I'll go over and start up a conversation about metaphysics . . .* But my elation soon came to a screeching halt. As the clerk ushered the woman to the metaphysics section, he asked, "What exactly are you looking for?" "Spell books," the woman replied, "I'm looking to learn how to cast spells," she said. As you can imagine, my elation quickly dissipated.

What, then, *is* metaphysics if not the study of the paranormal and the art of casting spells? Before we get to some of the more formal characterizations of the subject given by ancient and contemporary practitioners of the discipline, let's remind ourselves of the fact that wonder has traditionally been the lifeblood of philosophy from beginning to end.¹ And metaphysics, one of the main branches of philosophy in the Western tradition, is no different. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that wonder, astonishment, and awe are perhaps most intense and pointed when it concerns matters of existence and ultimate reality. Wonder suffuses the study of metaphysics from beginning to end. In the opening lines of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle famously remarks, "All men by nature desire to know." At our core, we have a deep hunger to understand reality—for knowledge of *what* kinds of entities exist, *how* these entities exist, and *why* these entities exist.

It is largely historical happenstance that we use the word "metaphysics" today to pick out the types of inquiry and questions that you'll typically find

¹See chaps. 1 and 2 of my *Christian Philosophy as a Way of Life: An Invitation to Wonder* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023).

in introductory metaphysics courses and textbooks like this one. The word originally derives from the title of one of Aristotle’s works *Ta meta ta physika*, which literally means “after the physical ones.” As the story goes, about a decade after Aristotle’s death, his lecture notes were compiled and edited into treatises, one being what we now call Aristotle’s *Physics*. The editor decided to call the lecture notes immediately after *Physics* in Aristotle’s corpus *Metaphysics* (*meta-* being the Greek prefix meaning “after”). And there you have it.

More seriously, the careful reader will notice that the very question “What is metaphysics?” itself appears to be a metaphysical question on its face, a question about the nature, boundaries, and proper modes of inquiry of a particular subject matter. Historically, metaphysics has been one of the main branches of philosophy in the Western tradition, and there have been a few prominent characterizations of the discipline down through the ages.

Yet I think it is important to clarify at the outset, lest I set you up for disappointment, what we are *not* seeking when we ask the question “What is metaphysics?” in this context. Many philosophers, myself included, are less than optimistic about the prospects of finding a complete, airtight definition of metaphysics. While we can provide a loose but helpful characterization of metaphysics—its distinctive aims, goals, and methods—identifying a clear-cut, universally satisfying definition of the discipline of metaphysics turns out to be extremely challenging.

What exactly do I mean by a precise, airtight “definition” in this context? When I speak of a “definition” your mind may immediately think of a dictionary or verbal definition, the kind you’d find in a trusted dictionary (as in the definition of the word “abdicate” as “to fail to fulfill one’s duty or responsibility”). While dictionary definitions are important, they are historically not the sorts of definitions philosophers are after. Rather, philosophers aim primarily at defining things, *what things are* at their core—in other words, their essential natures. Socrates’s unrelenting quest to discover the nature of piety, temperance, justice, courage, virtue, and beauty was a quest to grasp what each of these things is at its essential, defining core.

Aristotle himself, along with many metaphysicians who followed suit, referred to this sort of definition as a “real definition.”² In fact, the great medieval

²Aristotle says, “Clearly, then, definition is the formula of the essence.” See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.5 (1031a12), in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 2:1628.

Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) said that “it is clear that the essence of a thing is what its definition signifies.”³ So, to illustrate, a common real definition of a human being, one that is predominant in the Western philosophical tradition, is that human beings are rational animals; both rationality and animality are *definitive* of human beings and distinguish them from every other kind of being.

Let me make an honest admission to you: It’s actually quite challenging to come up with a complete, clear-cut real definition for most matters of substance—whether beauty, goodness, or justice (just read Plato’s dialogues and you’ll see what I mean!)—let alone entire conceptual disciplines like theology, philosophy, science, and in this case, metaphysics.

One reason metaphysics is so hard to define in this complete, clear-cut sense is that any proposed real definition will likely (a) favor one particular, heavyweight metaphysical view over another (and thus be highly controversial), (b) leave out an important aspect of traditional metaphysical inquiry or unconsciously cross over into foreign disciplinary territory (and thus not be complete or clear-cut, respectively), or (c) be so large and unruly that it will be profoundly unhelpful as a useful working definition (what philosophers call a conjunctive definition: metaphysics is a and b and c and d and e and f and . . .).⁴

So, what we are after in this chapter is better described as a loose characterization of the aims and methods of metaphysical inquiry that help set it apart from other forms of conceptual inquiry, nothing more. With this important qualification in mind, let’s look at some of the most influential characterizations of metaphysics, past and present.

METAPHYSICS AS THE SCIENCE OF BEING QUA BEING

One traditional way of characterizing metaphysical inquiry, going all the way back to Aristotle himself, is the idea that metaphysics is the study of “being qua being” (i.e., being as such), as Aristotle put it. In fact, let’s hear from Aristotle himself on the nature of metaphysics as the science of being qua being:

³Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence* 1.11, in Joseph Bobik, *Aquinas on Being and Essence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), 45.

⁴To illustrate (a), if one thinks that metaphysics is best understood as the study of ultimate reality, this of course presupposes that there is an aspect of being that is *ultimate* or *fundamental* in the first place.

It is the work of one science to examine being qua being, and the attributes which belong to it qua being, and the same science will examine not only substances but also their attributes, both those above named and what is prior and posterior, genus and species, whole and part, and the others of this sort.⁵

Try not to be thrown off by Aristotle's use of "science" here. By "science" Aristotle roughly means "an organized and articulable body of knowledge."⁶ But what exactly does Aristotle mean when he says that there is a single body of knowledge that examines being qua being or being as such? Aristotle and many subsequent philosophers in the Aristotelian tradition, were of the opinion that "being" (and similar terms like "existence") had different senses or meanings relative to the kind of thing in question. Another way of saying this is that, for Aristotle, "being" is not univocal (i.e., of the same sense or meaning). While we can predicate "being" or "existence" of both a kite and a dog, for instance, the kite and the dog are not said to "exist" in precisely the same sense for Aristotle. For Aristotle, since a dog and a kite belong to very different categories of being, they cannot be said to "exist" in precisely the same way. For those squarely in this Aristotelian camp, a key task of metaphysics is discovering what it is *to be* in each sense of the word.

At the heart of Aristotle's conception of metaphysics as the science of being qua being is the notion of an ontological category. You might roughly think of ontological categories as reality's objective classifications or groupings; the deepest joints that carve up reality (we will explore the ontological categories in much more depth in chap. 5).⁷ For Aristotle, there were ten categories of being—*Substance, Habit, Position, Time, Place, Passion, Action, Relation, Quality, Quantity*—with *Substance* being the most primary and fundamental category insofar as substances exist in their own right; for Aristotle, if substances "did not exist, nothing else could exist."⁸ You can think of the category of *Substance* as the root or foundation of all the other ontological categories, for Aristotle.

According to this rich and long-standing Aristotelian view, metaphysics aims to discover not only the different kinds of *beings* (tigers, poodles,

⁵Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.2 (1005a14-17) in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2:1587.

⁶Christopher Shields, *Aristotle* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 237.

⁷The metaphor of carving reality at its joints goes back to Plato. See *Phaedrus* 265d-266a, in *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 542.

⁸Aristotle, *Categories* 2b5-7, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1:4.

numbers, people, etc.) that exist but also different kinds of *being*. Did you catch that very subtle distinction? So, we might predicate the quality of *being healthy* to a thing, say a lion, when we say, “The lion is healthy.” But, for Aristotle, the quality of *being healthy* and the lion itself do not exist in the same way since they belong to the distinct ontological categories of *Quality* and *Substance*, respectively. Since qualities (like *being healthy*) characterize substances (like a lion) and not the other way around, qualities do not exist in themselves and are thus not primary. They ultimately depend on substances (which are the modified things that don’t themselves modify anything).

Since metaphysics is the science of being qua being, in particular, it differs from other areas of inquiry, like biology, physics, or even theology. Biology, for example, specifically aims to study a limited category of existing things, namely living beings, primarily by way of empirical observation; biology is the natural science of being qua living, we might say. Moreover, theology, as the science of God and all things in relation to God, can be thought of as an organized and articulable body of knowledge that works from principles supplied not from empirical observation (as in biology) or the natural light of reason (as in arithmetic), but from the more radiant and enduring light of divine testimony in Holy Scripture, first and foremost.⁹

Metaphysics as the science of being qua being, on the other hand, aims to investigate the many senses of “being” along with the most general categories of being as a whole, including how these different senses of “being” relate to one another. As such, metaphysics is uniquely different from other sciences (e.g., physics and biology) by virtue of its generality/universality: Metaphysics stands under and is arguably conceptually necessary for every other science that is limited to a particular domain of reality (what is physical and exists in space and time, what is living, what has a chemical structure, etc.). And as we will see in the next chapter, metaphysical inquiry is both indispensable and unavoidable at some level.

METAPHYSICS AND WHAT THERE IS: A QUINEAN APPROACH

While the above Aristotelian conception of the nature and aim of metaphysics is very old and is perhaps the most common way that metaphysics has been understood throughout the history of Western philosophy, a very

⁹See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 1. a. 2, in *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote, OP (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2012).

different conception of metaphysics now dominates the contemporary metaphysical landscape.

One contemporary way of characterizing the discipline of metaphysics, a way that has been very influential among analytic philosophers of the latter half of the twentieth century, stems from the work of Willard Van Orman Quine (1908–2000), whose influence on the contemporary metaphysical landscape is hard to overstate. Quine was a professor at Harvard University from 1936 to 1978 and worked primarily in philosophy of logic. He is one of the most influential analytic philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century. Without question, David Lewis (1941–2001), Quine’s most famous student, has had the most significant influence on how metaphysics is conceived of and practiced today.

Quine is often credited with reclaiming the discipline of metaphysics from its demise at the hands of the logical positivists, an influential group of European philosophers who thought metaphysical claims were strictly nonsensical (you’ll meet the positivists up close in the next chapter). Be that as it may, Quine was a sharp critic of traditional metaphysics as it had been practiced throughout much of the history of Western philosophy. The irony here is sharp; the very person who is largely credited with restoring metaphysics to its rightful place in contemporary philosophy was himself a sharp critic of a traditional, Aristotelian approach to metaphysics.

Quine’s influential critique of metaphysics as traditionally practiced, along with his alternative logical-formal approach, is clearly unpacked in his seminal 1948 paper “On What There Is.”¹⁰ For Quine, the primary aim of metaphysics (or “ontology,” as he puts it) is to say what exists or ask, “What is there?” Thus, existence questions such as, “Do numbers exist?” “Do holes exist?” “Does time exist?” and “Do fictional characters like Pegasus exist?” are the target of metaphysical inquiry. The metaphysician is to provide a list, an “ontological assay” as some philosophers put it, of beings that exist. This compiled ontological list need not specify any particular ordered or structured relationship between the items on the list.

To help illustrate the Quinean approach to metaphysics, it may help to compare two very different types of grocery lists. When I go to the store, my grocery list includes a simple itemized list of grocery items in no specific

¹⁰W. V. Quine, “On What There Is,” *Review of Metaphysics* 2 (1948): 21–38. This essay is reprinted as chap. 1 of *Metaphysics: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., eds. Jaegwon Kim, Daniel Z. Korman, and Ernest Sosa (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

order: eggs, spinach, apples, flour, almond butter, ice cream, and (when I was in college) Top Ramen. My wife's grocery list, on the other hand, is highly structured and organized; each item is neatly sorted into a particular category, and each category is properly arranged with respect to one another. Wait, oh yes, there's more! My wife even has each category correlated with the various regions of the grocery store to make the trip smoother and more efficient (which helps with three young children along for the ride!). For Quine and those contemporary philosophers who follow in his wake, the metaphysical task is to simply itemize what *is*, in no particular order—just like my grocery list.

Quine's particular approach to metaphysics is very closely wedded to a particular method for doing metaphysics, namely, the use of a formal-logical framework to clarify and simplify what it is we are committed to as existing in reality (what we are "ontologically committed" to, as philosophers put it) when we claim that our best scientific theories of the world are true. At the risk of being overly technical here, I need to say a bit more here about the Quinean task of answering existence questions, if for no other reason than the monumental influence such a method has had on the practice of contemporary metaphysics.

Let's ease in here as slowly as possible. Consider the mathematical truth: $2+3=5$. The statement is a simple statement of arithmetic and is clearly true. Now ask: What must the world be like in order for this statement to be true; what must we be ontologically committed to in order to affirm this simple mathematical truth? On the surface, the fact that the statement is true would also seem to require reality to be a certain way, in particular, to include things like numbers. If the numbers 2, 3, and 5 must exist in order for the above arithmetic statement to be true, then you are, according to Quine, ontologically committed to the existence of numbers. Let's put this a bit more precisely in terms of a three-step Quinean approach to answering existence questions (which, again, is the primary task of metaphysics):

1. Determine which statements are true in our best, scientific theories of the world.
2. Organize, clarify, and simplify these statements by symbolizing them in a particular formal-logical framework (first-order predicate logic, for Quine).

3. Voila! You are ontologically committed to all and only those entities needed to stand in as the values of the bound variables in order to make the statements true.¹¹

Here's a quick example of this process at work; the details are a bit challenging, so let me encourage you to hang with me! It is typical for our best, contemporary biological understanding of the world to refer to biological species as the most basic unit of biological classification. As such, contemporary biologists often affirm the truth of species statements like, "There are humans that are *Homo sapiens*." To find out what must exist in order for this statement about humans and biological species to be true, we first need to formally clarify and simplify this statement (a process Quine calls "regimentation") by translating it into a particular formal-logical framework. Philosophers call this framework "first-order," "predicate," or "quantificational" logic, a form of logic that employs predicates, variables, and quantifiers. As a quick guide, the symbol \exists is called the existential quantifier and should be read as "There exists at least one," " x " is a variable, " Hx " stands for " x is human," and " Sx " stands for " x is *Homo Sapiens*":

$$(\exists x)(Hx \ \& \ Sx)$$

This logical formula can be translated as "There exists at least one x , such that x is human and x is *Homo Sapiens*" or, more simply, "There exists a human that is *Homo Sapiens*." In predicate logic, what is called "the domain of quantification" is the relevant group of things the quantifier aims to single out for consideration (in our case the quantifier was \exists). This could include *everything* in the particular domain of quantification (e.g., all humans or all mammals) as with a quantifier that is unrestricted in scope (the universal quantifier \forall), or it could include *one particular thing* (or class of things) as with a quantifier that is restricted in scope, called the existential quantifier \exists , e.g., "There exists a black cat" as $\exists x(x \text{ is a cat and } x \text{ is black})$. Our variable above, x , is said to be "bound" by the existential quantifier in the sense that it is not a free-standing variable but is linked with the existential quantifier \exists .

Most importantly (hang in there, we're almost finished!), according to a Quinean approach, in order for the above logical schema $(\exists x)(Hx \ \& \ Sx)$ to be true, the bound variable (x)—the one linked to the quantifier \exists —must have

¹¹This has been adapted from Alyssa Ney, *Metaphysics: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 41.

a particular value, some *existing* thing that stands in for the variable and meets the relevant descriptions “is human” and “is *Homo Sapiens*.” Thus, a human and biological species must really exist to stand in as the value of the bound variable in the above true logical schema. There you have it! With this three-step Quinean methodology, our best scientific theories about biological species ontologically commit us to the existence of biological species.

As Quine famously said, “to be is, purely and simply, to be the value of a variable.”¹² One can derive one’s ontological commitments from what must stand in for the value of the bound variable in true logical schemas like the one above. So, if biological species are needed to stand in as the value for the bound variable in a true, logical schema like the one above, then you are ontologically committed to the existence of biological species. Similarly, if electrons are needed to stand in as the value for bound variables in true, logical schemas like $\exists x$ (x is an electron and x is negatively charged), then you are committed to the existence of electrons.¹³

The careful reader will notice that step 1 of the Quinean method is restricted to true statements concerning our best, scientific theories of the world. What about other important truths about reality other than scientific truths? As a committed proponent of “naturalism,” the philosophical view that all of reality is exhausted by the physical world, Quine was resolute that “it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described.”¹⁴ Everything we currently know and can possibly know about reality in its totality (not just part of reality) is given to us by our best, scientific theories of the world. In this sense, Quine (though certainly not all Quineans, I might say)¹⁵ aimed to naturalize metaphysics by making it more in line with

¹²Quine, “On What There Is,” 32.

¹³The picture, as you can imagine, is a great deal more complex and nuanced than I let on here. In fact, Quine thinks that if even after this process of regimentation one finds such ontological commitments untenable, one can try to paraphrase claims about the purported existence of certain entities into claims that involve no such ontological commitment. For example, one might believe it’s true that the average American family has 1.94 children (as of 2022), without believing that such talk commits one to the existence of 1.94 children. Rather, ordinary talk about the average number of children per US household can be paraphrased as talk about there being nearly two children per US household on average. Ordinarily, it is thought that a successful paraphrase in this sense must mean the same thing as the original statement it aims to paraphrase; if not, then the paraphrase is inadequate.

¹⁴W. V. Quine, *Theories and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 21.

¹⁵There are plenty of contemporary Christian metaphysicians who reject Quine’s naturalism yet who generally embrace Quine’s metaphysical method. Peter van Inwagen, for example, is a prominent Christian metaphysician who broadly follows Quine’s understanding of the aim and

the empirical sciences and dislodging it from its more traditional footing in Aristotle's conception of metaphysics as "first philosophy," a nonempirical area of study that is conceptually prior to the empirical sciences.

METAPHYSICS AS CATEGORIAL ONTOLOGY

Let's now turn to our second contemporary characterization of the nature, aim, and methods of metaphysics, articulated and defended by E. J. Lowe and inspired by Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition. According to Lowe, it is the primary task of metaphysics to "chart the possibilities of being, with a view to articulating the structure of reality as a whole, at its most fundamental level."¹⁶ This view overlaps a great deal with Aristotle's being qua being approach outlined above in its focus on the most general categories of being. It differs in that it doesn't necessarily wed itself to Aristotle's own view that there are many senses of being, that is, the view that being is analogical (and not univocal).¹⁷ Let's unpack this second characterization step-by-step, beginning with the latter notion that metaphysics aims to give an account of reality as a whole, at its most fundamental level.

In good Aristotelian fashion, when proponents of this view talk about a "fundamental level," they are referring to reality at its most general level (encompassing what is true of all things just insofar as they exist). As we have seen above with Aristotle's own view of metaphysics, the study of reality's most fundamental or general level in this sense has been traditionally called "categorical ontology," insofar as it aims to discover the most general categories of being and how those categories relate to one another.

The most bedrock categories of being—the ontological categories—have traditionally been understood to be ultimate and exhaustive. The categories are said to be ultimate in the sense that they aim to give the most fundamental, rock-bottom answer to the classification question "What, at bottom, is it?"

task of metaphysics. Interested readers will want to read van Inwagen's works "Metaontology," in *Ontology, Identity, and Modality: Essays in Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and "Being, Existence, and Ontological Commitment," in *Existence: Essays in Ontology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁶E. J. Lowe, "Metaphysics as the Science of Essence," in *Ontology, Modality, and Mind: Themes from the Metaphysics of E.J. Lowe*, eds. Alexander Carruth, Sophie Gibb, and John Heil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 14.

¹⁷In fact, Lowe firmly maintains that while there are many different kinds of *beings*, there is only a single notion or sense of "being" (i.e., "being" is univocal). See Lowe's *More Kinds of Being: A Further Study of Individuation, Identity, and the Logic of Sortal Terms* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 4.

Moreover, the categories are thought to be exhaustive in the sense that for absolutely any created entity that exists there is an answer to the classification question (i.e., every existing entity belongs to a fundamental ontological category, whether we know the answer or not).¹⁸

At its heart, the classification question (“What, at bottom, *is it?*”) is a question about the nature or essence of a thing, what ultimately defines the thing in question and specifies *what it is*. Tulips, electrons, viruses, iPhones, and human beings all have an essence in the sense that there is a definite answer to the classification question for each of these existing things. A tulip, of course, has a very different essence than an iPhone and thus belongs to a distinct, fundamental ontological category; one is the type of thing that can naturally sprout roots, the other not—at least not yet! At one level, the classification question—and our deep desire to understand the essential nature of things—is a natural, untutored, and distinctively human posture.¹⁹

I will have much more to say about ontological categories and natures in chapters five and six, respectively. For our purposes here, it is crucial to point out that for proponents of this conception of metaphysics, discovering the natures of things as determined by their ultimate ontological categories is *prior* to merely itemizing what exists. “According to this conception of the aim and content of metaphysical theory,” says Lowe, “metaphysics is above all concerned with identifying, as perspicuously as it can, the fundamental ontological categories to which all entities, actual and possible, belong.”²⁰ This is in sharp contrast to the Quinean approach that places existence questions front

¹⁸Traditionally, God has not been thought to be a member of a genus or species in the strict sense that God is a member of an ontological category alongside of created things. According to older Christian thinkers, if God can be said to be a substance in any sense, it is only in an extended or analogical sense to the way in which creatures are substances. For example, see Augustine, *The Trinity* 5.8.9 (and books 5-7 in general) in *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia. q.13, a. 5. For more on Aquinas’s view of the ontological categories, including the category of *Substance* and how it applies to God and creatures, see Jeffrey Brower, *Aquinas’s Ontology of the Material World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chap. 2.

¹⁹In fact, there is interesting research in developmental psychology that indicates that children begin asking the classification question from a very young age. Anyone with young children knows how common questions of classification are: “What is that thing?” See Susan A. Gelman, *The Essential Child: The Origins of Essentialism in Everyday Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), for psychological research on this natural, human posture.

²⁰E. J. Lowe, “Metaphysics as the Science of Essence,” in *Ontology, Modality, and Mind: Themes from the Metaphysics of E. J. Lowe*, eds. Alexander Carruth, Sophie Gibb, and John Heil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 14.

and center in the task of metaphysics as the sole aim of metaphysical inquiry. In fact, Lowe sharply criticizes the Quinean approach to metaphysics by calling it a “pseudo-ontology” and a “no category ontology,” insofar as it flattens the ontological structure of reality and construes beings as the values of variables (i.e., what we logically quantify over when we talk about the world.)²¹

According to Lowe and others in this Aristotelian camp, the essence of a (created) thing is prior to its existence, both in the order of reality and in the order of our knowledge of reality. To put it differently: *what* a thing is, is prior to *that* it is.

What exactly does this mean, and why think it’s true? Lowe offers two reasons for thinking that essence is prior to existence. First, something can only actually exist if it’s the sort of thing that could possibly exist. If something has a nature that precludes its existence, then you won’t ever find that thing lying around, no matter how hard you look. Consider a round square as an example. Given that *roundness* and *squareness* both make up the nature of a round square, and no single, existing thing could possibly have both of these properties at the same time (since they preclude one another and are thus mutually contradictory), we know that there are no round squares in existence. Just by examining the nature of a round square by the light of reason we know round squares do not—indeed *cannot*—exist.²²

The second reason Lowe gives as to why essence is prior to existence pertains to the order of knowing: How could we discover that something exists without having some initial grasp (however thin) of what it is in the first place? To illustrate, suppose I ask you: “Do you think furples exist?”²³ Yes, you heard me right, furples. How would you proceed to answer my question? Arguably, before you can adequately answer the existence question (do furples exist?), you must first get clear on the question of classification (what, at bottom, *is* a furple, and is its existence possible?); otherwise, you will have no idea whether

²¹For a sharp criticism of the Quinean approach to metaphysics, and the more logical-formal approach that Lowe calls “pseudo-ontology,” see E. J. Lowe, “New Directions in Metaphysics and Ontology,” *Axiomathes* 18 (2008): 273-88.

²²Sometimes one hears it said, “It is impossible to prove a negative claim, like ‘God does not exist.’” The apparent reason this is an impossible task is that one would have to explore every nook and cranny of reality in order to prove, without a doubt, that God is not there. But this is simply mistaken. If the essence of a thing is such that it involves predicating two incompatible properties of that thing, it is internally incoherent. Think: It makes no internal sense as it harbors an internal contradiction, such as something’s being green all over and red all over at the same time.

²³I owe this furple example to J. P. Moreland.

stumbling on something that exists, say a large, furry mammal lurking behind a tree, is a furple or something else altogether (a tiger). You can't discover that some particular thing is real if you have no idea what it is in the first place; that is, you can't make genuine ontological discoveries if you have no idea at all of what you are looking for.

We have seen, then, that for proponents of this neo-Aristotelian view of metaphysical inquiry, nonempirical or *a priori* knowledge (knowledge apart from sensory experience of the world) of natures by way of ultimate ontological categories is the central target of metaphysical inquiry. This also explains why, for Lowe, metaphysics aims to “chart the possibilities of being,” as said above. According to Lowe, a thing's essence or nature ultimately explains what is or is not possible for that thing, as well as what is or is not necessary for it. For example, a tulip, being a material object by nature, must have some spatial dimension or other; it must have some determinate length, width, and height. Given what it is to be a material object (a thing extended in a certain way throughout space, perhaps), it is not possible for a tulip to lack spatial dimension altogether. Or, consider a more controversial matter: whether it is possible for a human being to exist without a brain. One's answer to this query will say a lot about what you think the essence of a human being is (“not possible” say those who think human beings are wholly material, perhaps just their brain; “possible indeed” say those who think humans are not wholly material). For Lowe, truths about possibility and necessity (what philosophers call “modal truths”) are ultimately grounded in and explained by the essences or natures of things.²⁴

So, we've seen that in Lowe's Aristotelian-inspired view, the aim of metaphysics is to “chart the possibilities of being, with a view to articulating the structure of reality as a whole, at its most fundamental level,” which includes nonempirical knowledge of the natures of things as determined by their fundamental ontological categories.²⁵ It is important to point out that in contrast to the Quinean aim and task of metaphysics sketched above, Lowe's characterization does not restrict metaphysical inquiry to merely fleshing out the existence commitments of our best, scientific theories of the world. For Lowe, nonempirical knowledge of reality (knowledge apart from sensory experience of the world), including knowledge of the natures of things (and thus our

²⁴See chaps. 5 and 6 for more on natures and essences.

²⁵Lowe, “Metaphysics as the Science of Essence,” 14.

knowledge of what is possible), is absolutely central to the aim and task of metaphysics and is conceptually prior to science.²⁶

METAPHYSICS AND WHAT GROUNDS WHAT

A third contemporary way of characterizing metaphysics, also inspired by Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition, is that metaphysics is “the study of what grounds what.”²⁷ This approach, recently articulated and defended by philosopher Jonathan Schaffer, holds that the aim of metaphysical inquiry is not first and foremost to merely form “an unstructured list of existents” (what Schaffer calls “flat structure”) as on the Quinean approach to metaphysics. Rather, the proper aim of metaphysics is to chart the hierarchical structure of reality—to explore what Schaffer calls “ordered structure”²⁸ in the world—and how certain categories of being depend on other categories of being, ultimately arriving at a category of being that in no way depends on any other (i.e., *Substance*). Informally, metaphysics is less like ontological bean counting and more like exploring an ontological construction site—no hard hat required!

As with Lowe’s conception of metaphysics as categorial ontology (which shares a great deal in common with Schaffer’s approach here), this neo-Aristotelian approach is in stark contrast to the Quinean approach to metaphysics outlined above, as we have seen already. To help illustrate this important difference, let’s go back to the grocery list illustration I gave above. Let’s once again compare my “flat structure” grocery list with my wife’s “ordered structure” list, to use Schaffer’s terminology.

As previously noted, my grocery lists are usually nothing more than itemized, unstructured lists of things to buy (deodorant, milk, Top Ramen, bread, eggs, spinach, etc.); they are as “flat” and one-dimensional as can be. So, figure 1.1 represents what my grocery list normally looks like:

²⁶As suspected, Lowe’s view is much more nuanced and multifaceted than what is articulated here by way of introduction. For more on Lowe’s conception of the aim and task of metaphysics, see chap. 1 of his *A Survey of Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) or chap. 1 of his very challenging but rewarding book *The Possibility of Metaphysics: Substance, Identity, and Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²⁷Jonathan Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, eds. David Chalmers and David Manley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 347–83. This essay is reprinted as chap. 7 in *Metaphysics: An Anthology*, 2nd edition, eds. Jaegwon Kim, Daniel Z. Korman, and Ernest Sosa (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

²⁸Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” 355.

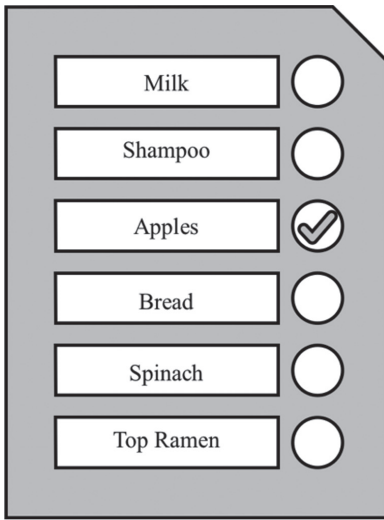


Figure 1.1. Ross's grocery list

My wife Suzanne's grocery list, by contrast, consists of a highly structured and ordered grouping of items that are related to one another in important ways; it exhibits "ordered structure" in Schaffer's terms. To add some flare to the illustration, suppose we assume, purely for the sake of illustration, that *Dairy* is the most fundamental or ultimate category on my wife's grocery list; all other categories of grocery items on her list revolve around and are subservient to *Dairy*. If so, then my wife's grocery list would have the following hierarchically ordered structure, with the category *Dairy* as primary and fundamental to all others (represented by both its size and the upward arrows), as depicted in figure 1.2:

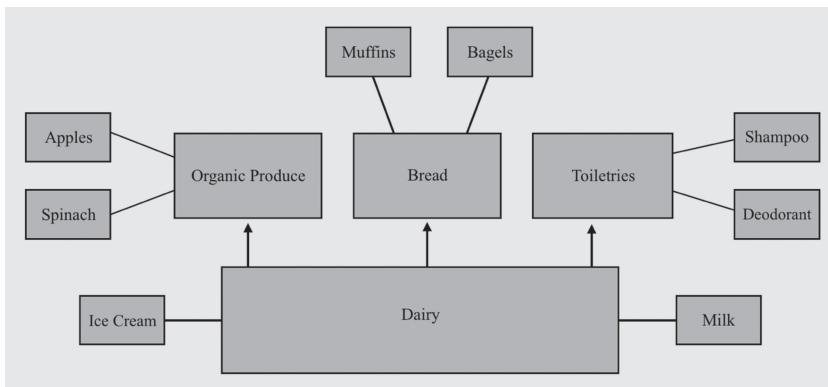


Figure 1.2. Suzanne's grocery list

If the aim of metaphysics was a bit like the aim of compiling grocery lists, it would be fair to say that I'd be more Quinean and my wife more Aristotelian, given the radical differences in our "flat" and "ordered" grocery lists.

Schaffer argues that metaphysics should aim to understand what is ultimate and most fundamental, and how every other category of being relates to what

is fundamental. According to Schaffer (and Lowe), since what lie at the bedrock or foundation of all reality are what Aristotle called “primary substances” (Gk. *ousia*), metaphysics aims to investigate primary substances as beings that are primary, basic, or fundamental. For Aristotle, the things that belong to the elite category of *Substance* do not depend for their existence on any other kind of being. For Schaffer, while existence questions (what beings are there?) are still a key part of metaphysical inquiry, they are nowhere near as important as the question of what beings are fundamental, and they certainly should not be conceived of as the proper end of metaphysical inquiry.²⁹ To merely inventory the group of existing beings without describing the various dependence relations between such beings (and which sort of beings are independent of all else), is to miss a vitally important feature of metaphysical inquiry: metaphysical structure.

Notice that the main thrust of Schaffer’s neo-Aristotelian view is not in tension with the previous Aristotelian-inspired views of the aim and task of metaphysics. In fact, Schaffer’s characterization of metaphysics *presupposes* that there are objective categories of being, some being more fundamental than others; that these categories carve out various ways of being; and that the aim of metaphysics is to explore the categorial structure of reality. All of these tenets are deeply Aristotelian. As is the case with many of the main contours of Lowe’s view, Schaffer’s approach can be seen as a contemporary redressing of an important aspect of a broadly Aristotelian approach to metaphysics (with a few additional bells and whistles, I might add).³⁰

A QUESTIONS-BASED APPROACH

A fourth characterization is what I’ll call a “questions-based approach” to the nature and aim of metaphysics. A purely questions-based approach moves away from the attempt to draw clear-cut disciplinary boundaries in order to uniquely characterize the aim and scope of metaphysical inquiry. Rather, such an approach points to either a distinctive type of philosophical question that

²⁹Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” 353.

³⁰One such novelty of Schaffer’s neo-Aristotelian account is his “permissivism” regarding what exists and his view that existence questions in general are trivial. For example, Schaffer, himself a self-declared atheist, believes that God exists. How might that be if he is an atheist, you ask? Well, for Schaffer, God is a fictional entity, like Harry Potter or Pegasus. For Schaffer, fictional entities *exist*, they are just *derivative* in so far as they are creations of the human mind and thus not fundamental (like substances are).

has historically been considered to fall within the purview of the discipline of metaphysics, or to questions that currently are being explored by contemporary philosophers working in the area of metaphysics. So, questions like the following are a sampling of what are typically considered to be distinctively metaphysical questions:

- What is time? Does time flow in one particular direction? Is time travel possible? Does the past or the future exist, in addition to the present?
- How do objects exist in time? Are they entirely present at a given moment in time, or are they spread out in time like a beaded necklace is spread out with different parts (beads) at different places?
- What is the nature of substance? Do individual substances exist? Or is the world exhausted by qualities or properties?
- What *is* existence?
- Are there properties, in addition to substances? If so, what are properties? Are properties universal or particular? Do they need substances to exist, or are they standalone sorts of beings? Where do they exist, if anywhere?

As a way of getting an initial grip on the subject matter of metaphysics, a questions-based approach can serve as a helpful handrail into some deep waters. But as a catch-all characterization of the discipline of metaphysics, such an approach has its limitations.

First, it may be the case that the sorts of questions that make it on the list are largely a reflection of what topics individual philosophers deem appropriate for distinctively metaphysical reflection. As these factors can often depend on shifting historical and cultural context, they provide a rather shaky conceptual ground as a way of characterizing the discipline of metaphysics. Second, we might ask: Why do these sorts of questions constitute distinctively metaphysical questions, and not others? Why not questions about the nature of knowledge, moral value, or the chemical composition of water? Do these questions not all have some common conceptual core? It may be that a questions-based approach already presupposes a particular view of the aim of metaphysics—it's the kind of inquiry that aims to explore *these* types of questions (and not *those* types of questions). It would be nice if we could get clear on the common conceptual core that unifies and classifies the above questions as distinctively metaphysical.

TOWARD A MIXED APPROACH

Toward this aim, let's consider one final approach to characterizing metaphysics as an area of inquiry, what I'll call a "mixed approach." The mixed approach takes aim at what is perhaps an underlying assumption of the above characterizations: that there is a single, uniform characterization of the discipline of metaphysics. But why think this? Why think that a proper characterization of metaphysics must be exclusively either the study of being qua being, categorial ontology, what grounds what, or a questions-based approach? Could not a characterization of metaphysics be multifaceted and incorporate many of these aims and methods?

This general, mixed approach has been put forward by Christian metaphysician Michael Rea. According to Rea: "(a) metaphysics is a non-empirical mode of inquiry, (b) it is partly about *what there is*, (c) it is partly about describing the essences or natures of things, and (d) it is concerned with what is possible, necessary, or impossible."³¹ There's a lot here, but you can see the sizable overlap with the previous conceptions of metaphysics we've already discussed in this chapter.

First, echoing Aristotle and Lowe, Rea's characterization involves an epistemological claim regarding the proper method and ways of inquiring that are definitive of metaphysical inquiry. Clause (a) states that metaphysics is a distinctively nonempirical, *a priori* mode of inquiry. As we will see in detail in the next chapter, metaphysical knowledge, as with philosophical knowledge in general, is grounded in rational insight about reality (and not *a posteriori* empirical observation).³² Second, this time echoing Quine, in clause (b) Rea maintains that metaphysics is also about what there is, that is, about answering existence questions (Does God exist? Does free will exist? etc.). But notice, in contrast to the Quinean approach, metaphysics for Rea is not *exclusively* about itemizing what there is and answering existence questions.

This brings us to clauses (c) and (d) of Rea's mixed characterization of the discipline of metaphysics. Clause (c) captures the Aristotelian notion, articulated in slightly different ways by Lowe and Schaffer, that metaphysical inquiry aims to explore the essential natures of things and how they are ordered

³¹Michael Rea, *Metaphysics: The Basics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 10.

³²Although, to be clear, Rea thinks that metaphysical inquiry is not "entirely free of empirical influence." See his *Metaphysics*, 10.

with respect to one another. While Rea considers both categorial analysis and the study of what grounds what to be vital aims that set metaphysics apart from other areas of philosophical inquiry, he is clear that he does not think that metaphysics can be *fully* captured by either of these tasks. As for clause (d), Rea is of the opinion that charting the domain of what is possible, necessary, and impossible is a characteristic feature of metaphysical inquiry. Clause (d) is closely aligned with Lowe's view that a primary aim of categorial ontology is to "chart the possibilities of being." However, for Lowe, there is a close connection between clauses (c) and (d) insofar as a thing's essence or nature ultimately explains what is possible, necessary, or impossible for that thing.

While there is much to explore about Rea's mixed characterization, we simply don't have the space to do so here. My aim is to give you just a taste of what a mixed approach to characterizing metaphysics might look like. The important point to make at this juncture is that in Rea's mixed approach, the discipline of metaphysics is not characterized solely by its method (clause (a)) or its subject matter (clauses (b), (c), (d)). Metaphysics can be a radiant, multifaceted jewel that is characterized by distinct and interlocking facets.

Let me close this chapter by taking stock of where we've been. My aim in this chapter has been to introduce you to several prominent characterizations of metaphysics as a subject of inquiry, both past and present. Remember, these are characterizations of the discipline of metaphysics, not clear-cut and airtight definitions. We've looked at Aristotle's time-tested view of metaphysics as the science of being qua being and how variations of his view have been articulated and defended by prominent contemporary metaphysicians like E. J. Lowe and Jonathan Schaffer. We have also explored the prospects and perils of a questions-based approach to characterizing metaphysics. All three Aristotelian characterizations of metaphysics—being qua being, categorial ontology, and the study of what grounds what—can be seen as complementary and mutually informative. Yet all three push back against the mainstream Quinean characterization of metaphysics as *solely* the task of discovering what exists by way of first-order canonical logic and our best scientific depictions of the world. So, now that you have an initial grasp of what metaphysics is, let's take a look at exploring the question whether metaphysical discoveries are even possible and, if so, how.

GOING DEEPER: WHAT IS METAPHYSICS?

Key Concepts in Metaphysics

- ontology
- essence
- criteria of ontological commitment
- Quine, W. V.
- conceptual analysis

Historical

- Aristotle, *Categories; Metaphysics*, book 4
- Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*
- Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*

Contemporary

- W. V. Quine, “On What There Is”
- Jonathan Schaffer, “On What Grounds What”
- E. J. Lowe, “Metaphysics as the Science of Essence”

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