

What is Metaphysics?

It's difficult to know what exactly Metaphysics is. Maybe this should not be the first question to answer, especially if we are beginning to study this discipline, but this would be like sending an explorer to see how our way ahead is.

A natural curiosity motivates us to think if the world is what it seems. In the sparse moments in which I'm free of the weight of the mundane issues this question comes insistently to my mind: if the world is what it seems? We know that sometimes things show themselves in the way they aren't, that there are illusions, and the senses might misguide us. The world seems to be constituted of material objects that have certain permanence. Also, when we observe an event, this always has as a cause another one, we see that objects do not disappear to nothing, or from nothing never comes something. The world seems to be in this way, but is it really so? Is the world some kind of illusion? What is that really exist? What is truth? These are some of the questions Metaphysics tries to answer, what exists, what is its nature, what is there, and how is it. What is the character of the world seen as a totality? By its etymology, Metaphysics which is formed by the prefix *μετά* (*metá*) *γ* *φυσικά* (*physiká*), would mean what goes beyond, or is over the physical. Its name gives the idea that is some kind of esoteric study, or about what is paranormal. This is the popular idea about this discipline, calling metaphysician to someone who makes esoteric studies about paranormal phenomenon. The name metaphysics just has as its origin a library classification. Metaphysics was the name of Aristotle's texts which were located on the shelf after those about physics. Aristotle himself called this texts as first philosophy, which gives us an idea that in them he dealt about fundamental concepts in philosophy.

If we would want to resume what metaphysics is with a single question that would be: Why is there something, instead of nothing? All the questions in philosophy head to this, like all the rivers to the ocean. Clearly, as Heidegger said "this is the mother of all questions". It's also clear that the majority of people seldom ask themselves this. Most of the times people answer this question referring back to big stories given by some of the world's religions. As the Christian theology says, that God created the world from nothing. Unlike religion and theology that base everything in belief, metaphysics attempt to answer the fundamental questions grounding everything in what we know with certainty. In Religion or Theology the question is: what do I believe? On the contrary in metaphysics, the main question is: What can I know about the world that could be reasonably free of any doubt.

Metaphysics can be considered a science, but it differs radically from any modern science. We can see why if we ask ourselves about the nature of scientific knowledge. Is it really knowledge? If we analyze with detail any scientific explanation of certain phenomena, for example sound, that physics explains as the vibration of air's molecules. How do we go from that explanation to the experience of sound by itself? At most what science gives us is just a more detailed and precise description, but all phenomena appear as mysterious as they were for Stone Age humanity. Apparently science objective is to formulate theories in an economical way. This means to describe as many phenomena as possible with the minimum amount of principles. The economical way is similar to the Ockham Razor principle which says that the simplest explanation is the most probable. When a scientific theory is true? Or what is science truth criterion? The answer is: a theory is true when enables us to

make precise quantitative predictions about the world. It's obvious that being able to make quantitative predictions gives us certain power over the world. We see that in science there is an equation between truth and power, or that truth is power. A scientific theory can be seen as model of the world that gives us the possibility to make predictions about it, and not necessarily the model represent existent entities. It seems that science is more about having some kind of control or power over the world than about knowledge. So if we want to have knowledge about the world where should we look? In Metaphysics may be the answer. Historically Metaphysics was intended to provide the foundations for all science, but its main objective is to give real knowledge. By real knowledge I understand to determinate what exists, its nature, and answer to the question what is truth? Metaphysics differs radically from modern science, but in their origin they came from the same source. In their beginning metaphysical and scientific thought were not differentiated, and both sprang from the desire to explain the nature of the world in base a principle, or group of concepts that were considered fundamental. This was one of the objectives of the first philosophers, which were also the first scientific thinkers. They seek to explain the world in a non mythical way; not as a creation of anthropomorphic gods, but in base of a first principle or fundamental element. It's commonly accepted that Thales of Miletus (c. 624 BC – c. 546 BC) was the first philosopher in the western tradition (and for that the first Mathematician and scientific, because these disciplines were not separated from philosophy). He said that the fundamental principle of everything was water, or that in the end all things are made of water. This affirmation which at first seems ingenuous contains an important idea, that the multiplicity of things is only apparent, and that there is a unity in everything. In Thales's theory of water as a fundamental principle we find in embryonic form two fundamental ideas in the history of science and Metaphysics: one the difference between what it seems and what it is, and the other the explanation of the world in base of substance and its properties. This idea of substance as the unchanging thing, which for Thales is water, is common in almost all pre-Socratic thinkers, called in this way because their philosophies flourished before the time of Socrates. In the pre-Socratic thinkers we find the beginning of all posterior philosophical ideas, and also the foundations and presuppositions of modern science. The energy concept of modern physics seems like an echo of this fundamental idea of substance. We could say that almost all Metaphysical and basic scientific concepts are in some way present in a germinal mode in the pre-Socratic's thinking. We find not only the beginning of Metaphysical concepts, but also the starting point of Metaphysics and scientific Method. Literally the word method means to go after, or the way that take us to our destination. We can ask what the destination of the Metaphysical thought is, or, what is its object of study? It can't be a thing or category of things, because in that case it would fall under the field of study of one of the sciences, and its method would be the experimental or scientific method. If Metaphysics's object of study can't be one thing or category of things, it has to be what they have in common which is the fact that they exist or have Being. It is then Being Metaphysics's object of study, but is the way or method that takes us to think about being? This is question that the pre-Socratic thinker Parmenides (5th century B.C.) tried to answer, whom in his philosophical poem *On Nature* described two ways or paths of inquiry, one the way of opinion or appearance, which is the most common and traversed by the mortals, and is where the use of senses take us. The other is the way of truth, where we can go only by means of the use of reason or logos. He divides the way of truth in two one possible: what it is, and other impossible: what is not. For Parmenides the senses only give us illusory or apparent knowledge. In the way of truth he deducts everything from the tautological principle: Being is and not Being is not. In this Poem Parmenides express the first paradigmatic phrase about Being, "being is", and "not

Being is not". At the same time introduces a way of thinking that I would call Proto-Rationalistic, in which starting from self-evident principles, and through a logical process deducts a series of Metaphysical propositions. In them he express that which exists is necessary, unique, without beginning, timeless and immutable. Parmenides thinking, which had a profound influence in the development of Metaphysics by introducing the question of Being, can be seen in three ways: One as a dialectical movement expressing apparently the opposite of his contemporary Heraclitus; this is while Heraclitus said that everything was in constant state of flux, or becoming, Parmenides said that change was only apparent, and what exist is immutable. The other is the intention of warning us about the illusory nature of the knowledge given by our senses, and that the only true knowledge, is the one we get using our reason starting from self-evident principles. The third way to see Parmenides thinking is that by denying something as evident as the movement, he warns us without wanting himself, of the other form of illusion, namely the illusion of reason. This consists that starting from premises apparently correct, and trough reasoning also right we arrive to conclusions evidently false. Parmenides philosophy is the starting point of the question of Being, and all posterior Metaphysics could be resumed as the history of this question. Parmenides also introduces in Metaphysics thinking a concept that I would call of the two worlds, the conceptual world, which can only be apprehended with reason or logos, and the sensible world, that is what we experience with our senses. Probably Parmenides dual way to see Reality influenced Plato to develop its theory of the two realms of Reality; the ideal world, which for him was the truth world, and the sensible world, or world of the shadows.

In Plato's Metaphysics the Being of things is the Idea or "eidos", word that etymologically means form, then that's like saying that the Being of beings is its form. For Plato as we may expect, the ideal science and the model for philosophy would be Geometry, the science of forms. Geometry a science that has an apparent solidity, in which starting from simple intuitively evident Geometric propositions, called axioms, every other proposition is logically deduced.

To make of Metaphysics a science that has the solidness and the Method of Geometry has been the ambition of some philosophers, like Rene Descartes who himself was an extraordinary Geometrician and Mathematic. Taking Geometry as a model for Metaphysics would be equivalent to find basic evident Metaphysical axioms, and deduct logically from them every other Metaphysical proposition. This is what Descartes tried to do in his *Discourse on the Method*, where he formulated his Metaphysical axiom "cogito ergo sum", or I think then I am, as proposition about which it's impossible to doubt. Even though it's debatable that the proposition "I think therefore I am" is self-evident, being maybe more fundamental the proposition that something exists, what it's probably certain is Descartes idea that Metaphysics should be a deductive science that start from a priori valid self-evident principles. By a priori valid I refer to principles that we don't get trough experience. Metaphysics can't be an only experimental science, because trough experience we only get fallible knowledge, which cannot be elevated to the category of universally valid.

Probably one of most evident and basic propositions that we can make about the world is that something exist. Once we know that something exist, as I said at the beginning of this essay, the main objective of Metaphysics is to determinate its nature. With Plato's philosophy, for which the true world and the existent was the conceptual world o the world of ideas, I could say that begins a debate that continues to this day about what exists; if what exist is what is conceptual or universals

which is called realism, and the contrary option Nominalism which denies any existence to universals.

We know that modern science like physics, grounds everything in concepts like space and time. One of the main Metaphysical questions is to know if space and time have existence by themselves, or exist only in our mind, being then only a way for our mind to organize and give coherence to sensory information. If space and time are not existent entities, one consequence would be that all science would be reduced to just a model of reality, and for that, about inexistent things.

Metaphysics contrary to other sciences need to fight for its existence, because there are some philosophical positions, like logical positivism which denies any meaning to metaphysical propositions. For logical positivism, only propositions which make predictions about the world have meaning. The question is, if that proposition in itself makes some prediction about the world.

Even though its possibility is denied, Metaphysics is the only discipline that could give a unified vision about the world as a whole. In an age of superabundance of information, and of increasingly tendency towards specialization, if Metaphysics doesn't have the answers, at least for me, offers the way for critical self-reflection about what can we know, what do we know, and what is truth.