

Metaphysical Problems and the Pursuit of the “Ultimate”

What is metaphysics? Is there anything special about the methods of metaphysics, or about its subject matter? Illustrate your answer with one example of a metaphysical problem or controversy.

According to our reading the “metaphysician seeks nothing less than a *definition of reality*”. (Nature of Things 1, para. 4) Our awareness of the world brings with it an understandable curiosity about what is the nature of the universe, or at least the world as one sees it. For some it is an insatiable curiosity that leads to, for most, scientific or religious pursuits. This curiosity is not just about what we can see but what reality is made of, the basic element, “the fifth essence” (also known as the “substance of all creation”) of Alchemy, the basic particle of physics, the isness of it all (Moran, pg. 11). Our quest in metaphysics is an attempt to break down that, which is not readily apparent through the five senses. Indeed, all scientific inquiry is an attempt at understanding one or more elements of metaphysical reality without skirting into virtual reality, a world of our own invention.

One may then ask, “Why even attempt a non-scientific approach to understanding reality at all?” The answer lies in that we are preordained, as it were, to ask questions about reality, that and metaphysics predates science. At the age of eight or nine, I often wanted to know why I was, what if I were not real and what was it all for. I would not say that I was any different from most children in that I was baffled by it all. Nature and reality didn’t make sense and, in many ways, still remains a mystery. I was attempting to transcend, even at a young age, what I saw and understood to be the reality of the universe. I thought that there must be a reason for me being there (prior to any biological explanation) and with that “blind spot” I thought there must be something I am missing. I had no answers, but I did have the abstract ability to wonder.

Metaphysics is a philosophical method of transcending our senses and awareness to ascertain the nature of the cosmos--of life, the universe and everything--within epistemological constraints. But how can we get past the mundane, beyond all the particles of the universe, to get at the core of it all? How can I inquire into something without having material to experiment on? The universe is not likely to be reducible to mundane, empirical knowledge and appealing to divine inspiration is out of the question—for obvious reasons (Nature of Things, para. 9)

One method would be the “negative dialectic” or what I like to call the Sherlock Holmes/Spock approach. That is, by having “eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.” Holmes used this reasoning to tackle the mundane, but the method applies somewhat to metaphysics in that it is a process by which we eliminate one thing to get at the probability. But there is the distinct possibility that we could end up negating until there is nothing left. Using a video game analogy, and I feel that I must as a gamer, it’s as if one were searching for a quest on a map only to find out that the game has a glitch and there was never a quest in the first place. I wander here and yon to in a fruitless search for what is not there. Yet this wild goose chase is far better, for many, than not searching at all.

But even Holmes would have to admit that there is more to the universe than even he could deduce given his limited ability to perceive or know. Maybe he would then turn to “the reality principle”, the “idea that there is such a thing as the way things are irrespective of how we would like them to be” (Nature of Things 1, para. 15). Therefore, there are elements of the universe, according to this principle, which exist outside my perception, which I have no awareness of. Bees perceive ultra violet light, whereas I do not. Various animals perceive the stirrings of an earthquake far sooner than any human. Yet these examples are not quite what we are talking about when we discuss the reality principle, as we are going beyond the perceptible and the perceiver. What we are talking about are elements of the universe, which may not necessarily require a perceiver, which exist independent of us. Here we stand on the edge of invention, once again. Fanciful imaginings are more likely to engage us than “reality” if we are not careful.

Yet there were those, like Bishop Berkeley, who established for themselves that for reality to exist there must be a perceiver. Not a fallible human perceiver but God. Therefore, reality does not exist outside of God’s perception and is not independent, but a conditional reality. Contrarily, the anti-realists established that there was no objective reality, or that verification-transcendent statements are either true or false. This battle between Realism and anti-realism involved several philosophical greats like Wittgenstein, Dummett and Putnam and is one of the great disputes in Philosophy.

A popular novel, *The Secret*, imagines a world in which human beings have the ability to alter reality by willing change. This is somewhat like the double slit experiment, in physics, to verify if light is a particle or a wave. By observing the experiment scientists changed the outcome. Could this book, *The Secret*, have a scientific backing? Could this experiment be the herald of the return of metaphysics, the “Queen of the Sciences?” At this point it is a highly unlikely.

Yet in metaphysics we are speculating more than experimenting. Thought experiments rule in metaphysics rather than scientific testing. That is not to say that thought experiments do not have a place but against the larger universe, against territory that is too abstract, it is hard to imagine an unassailable position by which we can put our finger down firmly and say, “This is the basic substance of reality and that by which all things are made!” Thales and others imagined the universe as being made of pure elements, such as water, fire, earth or air. These imaginings were not tested via the scientific method but through unverifiable reasoning and thought experiment. The Alchemists went even further in attempting to burn, or reduce, material to its “quintessence”. They literally set fire to all they could to get to the core of it all; yet it evaded them as much as lead refused to transform to gold, and as the Philosopher’s Stone avoided discovery. Yet as we continue trying to pry the secrets of reality from the universe, whether in new Wave-Duality experiments (dual slit) or elsewhere, we seem unlikely to find what we are looking for.

Works Cited

1. Moran, Bruce. *Distilling Knowledge: Alchemy, Chemistry, and the Scientific Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. Print.