

# *Pathways to Philosophy*

## PROGRAM F: METAPHYSICS

### *The Ultimate Nature of Things: Unit One*

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#### **(a) metaphysics and the problem of beginnings**

1. WHEN does philosophy become metaphysics? Is there a specific test one can apply? Is it a question of depth, generality – or plain immodesty?

**But in the first place, I can ask nothing of you but to bring with you, above all, a trust in science and a trust in yourselves. The love of truth, faith in the power of mind, is the first condition in Philosophy. Man, because he is Mind, should and must deem himself worthy of the highest; he cannot think too highly of the greatness and the power of his mind, and, with this belief, nothing will be so difficult and hard that it will not reveal itself to him. The Being of the universe, at first hidden and concealed, has no power which can offer resistance to the search for knowledge; it has to lay itself open before the seeker – to set before his eyes and give for his enjoyment, its riches and its depths.**

**G.W.F. Hegel *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Inaugural Address***

From our vantage point late in the twentieth century, Hegel's exuberant endorsement of the power of human reason would make many academic philosophers smile – or more likely grimace. The dream of unlocking the Being of the universe, they will tell you, has long since been exploded, the tradition of metaphysical speculation so thoroughly 'overcome' by successive generations of critics that one can scarcely imagine what it might have been

like to share the optimistic faith in philosophic 'science' that Hegel sought to instil in his audience. Under such adverse circumstances, anyone foolish enough to seek to revive the art and science of metaphysics would be well advised to resort to subterfuge and pursue their project under an altogether different name.

2. But what if one were seeking to teach the elements of metaphysical inquiry to persons who knew nothing of the rise and fall of the subject once lauded as 'Queen of the Sciences'? Where should one begin? The very first philosopher, the pre-Socratic thinker Thales, was the first metaphysician. (He is also celebrated for being the first physicist, on the strength of the same discoveries: there will be time enough to unravel that conundrum.) Thales put forward, or at least is credited with the theory that everything is ultimately water – appearances to the contrary. The student who can grasp what talk of the 'ultimate' might mean here (not a term, it should be noted, that Thales is reported ever to have used) is well on the way to comprehending the kind of inquiry metaphysics is, or might be. Yet that is only to make a start. To place metaphysics in its true historical perspective, to unravel all the philosophic insights and illusions that have contributed to its meaning over two and a half thousand years, would seem to involve nothing less than a survey of the entire history of philosophy.

3. That is not the approach we shall be taking. Of course we must begin at the beginning. We cannot assume any prior knowledge or take anything for granted. But the beginning need not be a *historical* beginning. For the nature of metaphysics is more than simply a historical question. If it were, then a contemporary work of metaphysics would be a work of history, not philosophy. The reason for our pursuing the subject as philosophers can only be that we are still puzzled and gripped by its questions. It is not enough to be puzzled that other philosophers should have found such questions puzzling (though what other philosophers have *said* will serve us well as raw material). To approach these questions, moreover, we must proceed from first principles. We have to adopt beginners minds, if we are to have any hope of seeing things *differently*, in the face of the enormous pressure to view them from within the narrow confines of unreflective 'common sense'. In an important sense, therefore, every philosopher who undertakes metaphysical inquiry – that is to say, undertakes it in earnest, and not simply with the

intention of raking over the bones of the past – invents the subject all over again.

4. What the metaphysician seeks is nothing less than a *definition of reality*. We are concerned with the world as a whole, and equally with the essential elements that go together to make a world. Now, one can define something in the sense of explaining the meaning of a term, and also in the sense of defining the limits of a territory, just as a particular colour might represent a country on a map. So we are concerned with the meaning of the terms 'reality', 'real', 'world', 'thing' and also with the limits of all that is real, the totality of all the things there are. Yet such notions as defining a term or a territory are too abstract as they stand to convey any useful information. They do not yet give any sense of the interest that such a project might have. We are not lexicographers, seeking to chart how certain terms are used. We are concerned with the nature and extent of whatever it is that the words 'reality' or 'world' refer to. At the same time, every branch of human knowledge, it must be said, is concerned with the 'geography' of some aspect of reality, everything one might study can be thought of as existing within its own territory, as having its own unique place in the scheme of things. The question is, What could it possibly mean to seek out reality itself as a totality, apart from its myriad aspects? In what sense could the world *as such* be said to have its 'own unique place in the scheme of things'?

5. Anyone looking for an answer to these questions in the etymology of the term 'metaphysics' is liable to be initially disappointed. The Greek phrase *meta ta phusika*, was originally no more than a classification coined by the librarians at the ancient library at Alexandria that referred to a certain collection of Aristotle's works which they chose to place on the shelves 'after' his Physics. There is no record of the principle of classification. (For all we know, it might have been by the date of authorship, or the size of the parchment rolls.) Aristotle himself, in the works known as the Metaphysics, describes the enquiry he is engaged in variously as 'first philosophy', or 'theology', or the definition of 'being *qua* being'. If the Alexandrian librarians had meant to classify according to the contents of the works, then they must have thought that such topics were, logically, the next thing one would inquire into after inquiring into physics. That would hardly seem to justify the picture that 'above and beyond the physical' creates in the minds of those

who come across the term 'metaphysics' outside the context of academic philosophy.

6. On second thoughts, perhaps we should not allow our enthusiasm to be so quickly deflated by such a pedantic observation. Is not the prospect of exploring beyond the physical – beyond our mundane relations to things – precisely what excites and nourishes our continuing fascination with the subject?

**When poetry, art and religion have ceased wholly to interest, or when they show no longer any tendency to struggle with ultimate problems and to come to an understanding with them; when the sense of mystery and enchantment no longer draws the mind to wander aimlessly and to love it knows not what; when, in short, twilight has no charm – then metaphysics will be worthless.**

**F.H. Bradley *Appearance and Reality*  
Introduction.**

The sober point to make against the popular understanding of metaphysics is that the study of 'ultimate problems' is quite different from *super-physics*, the attempt to discover truths about the physical world by pure unaided thought; and different again from *para-physics*, which (for those who are convinced by its claims) is concerned with such mundane phenomena as water divining, telepathy and spoon bending. – For those students of philosophy initiated into its mysteries, metaphysical inquiry yields prospects far stranger and more enthralling than either of these.

7. Here then is a more concrete, though rather more controversial characterisation of the object of metaphysical inquiry. The essential move of metaphysics – the thing that sets it apart from every other form of knowledge or inquiry – lies in an attitude of radical doubt or bewilderment in the face of the very existence of the world. The infant's desperate cry for its mother thus already contains the seed of doubt that will eventually put the world itself into question. That primordial, temporary but necessary separation from what nurtures and protects us is what first allows room for the fatal question mark to slip silently into human consciousness, a question that is no mere

abstract idea, but something that will prove urgent and practical: our very sense of what is real. The metaphysical attitude is indeed no mere trick or habit we pick up from pursuing the academic study of philosophy; it is in our nature. One of the first lessons we learn is how to be metaphysicians.

8. Metaphysics is essentially *transcendent*. In attempting to break free from our immersion in mundane things, however, as metaphysicians have traditionally sought to do, the contemporary metaphysician no longer seeks a world of absolutes – purer, fairer, more ‘necessary’ than the transient world of phenomena – but merely to increase the angle of view on our own familiar world. ‘Defining reality’ in this relatively modest sense means stepping outside the mundane world (just one step would be enough) in order to grasp it synoptically *as* a world, a reality, something that mind, or the ‘I’ stands in relation *to*. Yet even one step might be thought by those who remain sceptical about the very possibility of metaphysics as a step too far. For, in accounting for the possibility of thought concerning the world as it appears to us, or concerning all that is the case – in effect, determining the limits of mundane thinking – it seems that one must find the far, no less than the near side of that limit ‘thinkable’. – But how can one think at all outside the very limits of thinking?

**Yet the tendency represented by...[man’s] impulse to run up against the limits of language...points to something. St Augustine already knew this when he said: What, you wretch, so you want to avoid talking nonsense? Talk some nonsense, it makes no difference!**

**L. Wittgenstein ‘On Heidegger’  
(Notes dictated to Waismann).**

What kind of talk is that? How can it ever be *meant*? We are not using language to describe, say, the relation between one mundane thing (‘man’) and another (‘the universe’), nor analysing the conditions under which there exists something to be described. Nor, failing that, are we merely giving vent to the symptoms of some philosophical illusion. What other alternative is there? – The possibility of metaphysics resolves into the question: is there any topic that is not mundane? Is there any thinking that is not mundane thinking?

9. There is an equally serious worry. If the subject matter of metaphysics is not reducible to mundane, empirical knowledge then it seems we are cut off from any appeal to empirical facts to support our theories. Divine inspiration is clearly not a source of knowledge one can appeal to within the context of a philosophical inquiry. Yet it seems we must at the same time resist at all costs the temptation to indulge in empty speculation:

**I have prescribed to myself the maxim, that in this kind of investigation it is in no wise permissible to hold *opinions*. Everything, therefore, which bears any manner of resemblance to an hypothesis is to be treated as contraband; it is not to be put up for sale even at the lowest price, but forthwith confiscated, immediately upon detection.**

**I. Kant *Critique of Pure Reason*  
Preface to First Edition.**

Our aim is to construct, by means of rational argument, a ladder of philosophical propositions that will, in some manner, bring into clear view the very limits of the mundane world. Even putting aside the worry about how language could continue to function under such circumstances, we still have the problem of where to *begin*. But to that problem, there is, strictly speaking, no solution. Every starting point is an assumption, 'an hypothesis'; nor is there any serious hope of making a genuine beginning – that is to say, grounding a system of metaphysics – without starting somewhere.

10. In the face of the strict impossibility of building from the foundations up, the method of *negative dialectic* serves as a workable makeshift. When nowhere is the right place to start, our only recourse is to start anywhere, framing provisional hypotheses purely for the sake of rejecting them, and thus gaining knowledge from that negation. Put simply, the hope is that through successive rebounds from one partial or distorted view to another, we might with luck succeed in approaching somewhere near our destination. Of course, there is no guarantee of success. One could remain on the rebound forever (like the fly that Wittgenstein sought to lead out of the fly bottle). Worse, even if one happened to stumble on 'the truth' (supposing there to be just one), there are no special marks to distinguish it as the one view that *will* never be refuted. – Then we must give up that false ideal and adopt instead a

pragmatic attitude: our current position is simply what seems to work best for us now; the latest step along a path (it will always *appear* the decisive step), a path whose end we shall never literally see.

### (b) defining reality

11. It is now time to start looking for problems to which our dialectical method can be applied. – There is an air of paradox about this statement. One might suppose that one hardly needs to look for problems concerning ‘the world as a whole’, for questions such as, What brought the world into being?, What is the purpose behind it?, Why are we here?, Is all there is just physical stuff? are part of popular (and religious) perception of the so-called mystery of existence. What is much harder to see is that these are generally grasped as mundane, not metaphysical questions. The extravagant creation myths current at the time of the Presocratic philosophers, or the scarcely less naive story in Genesis, certainly provide one kind of answer to how and for what purpose the world came to be. But they do so only by separating one portion of reality – ‘the heavens above, the earth beneath, and the waters under the earth’ – from another, say a divine architect; or, as in some Greek creation myths, a giant egg from which the world was hatched. (As if to emphasise this very point, Douglas Adams in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* advances the jocular suggestion that the earth was made by super-intelligent mice!) But if it is reality itself that we are concerned with, then we must find a different way of understanding such questions. The vicious regress that they generate would be obvious to any schoolboy.

12. A step towards a more sophisticated understanding might be this. Accounts of how the world came to be that take the form ‘A caused B to come into being’ might be saved from the threatened regress by making A a *necessary* being. There is no necessity for the existence of a giant egg, or super-intelligent mice, nor indeed for a wise architect whose power is only

relatively greater than our own. Thus arises the notion of a deity who is not finitely but infinitely wise, powerful and good. According to the ontological argument (first propounded by St Anselm) the existence of such a being follows as a logical consequence of its definition as that which is 'most perfect of all beings', on the grounds that lack of existence would be an imperfection. Whether or not such a form of argument could ever be valid (and the case is not yet closed), what is not in doubt is that in addressing that question we step into the realms of metaphysics.

13. Or, to take another example, if we consider the question of whether physical matter is all there is, the mundane answer put forward by spiritualists is that the soul survives the death of the body because its material is 'non-physical'. But bodies made of this non-physical stuff or 'ectoplasm' would in principle be vulnerable to destruction just like physical bodies: parts that occupy space can always in principle be disarranged or destroyed. The problem of how a physical body can have a sense of self or consciousness is indeed no more acute than the problem of how a body made of invisible ectoplasm can have consciousness. One is thus logically impelled to posit a second soul inside the ectoplasmic soul-body, and the regress is on its way. That is why the philosopher Descartes dismissed notions of the soul as 'a wind, a breath of air, a vapour' arising from popular beliefs in favour of a far more radical, metaphysical dualism of material and thinking substances. The proposition that I cannot doubt my existence as a thinking being, Descartes argues in his *Meditations*, establishes the logical possibility that my consciousness would exist even if I was being deceived by an evil demon into wrongly attributing the source of my subjective experiences to a world of matter in space. But if consciousness can conceivably exist in the absence of matter, then in its own essential nature it can have none of the attributes of matter. It does not occupy space, it has no spatial location. Its only properties are purely mental properties.

14. The examples we have given characterise the beginnings of metaphysics. The truths that philosophers have sought to establish – such as the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent being, or of an immaterial soul – are necessary truths, propositions that one comes to accept as a consequence of what purport to be rational, logically valid arguments. They serve as excellent examples to start from. Yet clearly even these relatively

sophisticated notions of God or the soul still display their mundane origins. So long as our vision is confined to the familiar questions of how the world came to be or what it is made of, we have not yet come to terms with the question of existence *itself*, our relation to the world as a totality. We need to increase the angle of our vision further still.

15. Let us return to the mother and child. The hard lesson to be learned is the essential difference between fantasy and reality. A fantasised breast is not an actual breast, even though the fantasy image may provide its own temporary satisfaction. For the fantasy image, its existence consists wholly in its being perceived or enjoyed: the breast overflows with milk because that is what the child desires above all else. The real breast, by contrast, stubbornly remains the physical organ that it is in reality – perhaps dry and barren, or beyond reach – irrespective of the infant’s desires. Such a scenario might be thought of as more relevant to analytic psychology than to philosophy. Yet its philosophical importance – which transcends the biological peculiarities of the human race – is unmistakable. 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, is indeed a sublime, opaque, baffling notion. There is something that is *there*, something that is *that*: a harder-than-diamond hardness that our will cannot scratch or move, a blankness at the very heart of things that (*pace* Hegel) the intellect can never enter into and appropriate.

16. To become aware that there is a deep philosophical problem here is to take the decisive step into metaphysics. The most vivid sense of reality, the desire at all costs that one conform one’s beliefs and actions to the way things are and not the way one would wish them to be, does not suffice. – In the light of this, it is perhaps not so difficult to appreciate Heidegger’s approach to this question in his great work, *Being and Time*. Seeing that no mere act of perception or discursive thinking is sufficient to explain the disclosure of Being itself, how reality or the world as such becomes visible against the background of mundane things, Heidegger directs his attention instead to a mood, an emotion: existential ‘dread’. That which *is*, independent of my will, stands out in absolute contrast to my freedom to act in the light of what I recognise factually to be the case. Only my genuine (thus ‘anguished’) acknowledgement of my own freedom suffices for my recognition of the

world as a totality, the question of Being as such, in contrast to the being of this or that mundane object that I might encounter.

17. We shall not venture on a critique of Heidegger here. The question is how a metaphysics that makes a genuine break with mundane involvement with things could ever get underway, how 'the world as such' could ever come to present itself as a problem. As we have already remarked, the seed is there, in the infant's ambivalent relation to its perceptions and imaginings; but something extra is still needed to make that seed germinate. We shall discover much later how the question of action plays a central role in the philosophical definition of reality: to that extent, we are in agreement with Heidegger. But it is hard to see how the emphasis on freedom helps explain how reality itself becomes a problem for us. We have emphasised the unhappy discovery of the impotence of one's will to change the way things are through merely wishing they were different. Heidegger simply emphasises the reverse side of that contrast, the fact that there is such a thing as my exercising my freedom to act in the light of how things are, which I myself cannot view as merely a product of how things are.

18. The question of how metaphysics could have arisen may never be given a completely satisfactory answer. We find ourselves capable of being gripped by metaphysical questions (some of us, at any rate). The logic of metaphysical arguments may leave us cold on occasion, but at least we comprehend (or, at least, seem to comprehend) what it is to reason along those lines. Perhaps Martians or Andromedans have never felt the impulse towards metaphysics, and, if so, then there would be an important area of human experience that would for them forever remain a closed book. To say this is to take a stand on the *irreducibility* of metaphysical discourse. There is no entry from the outside (as the logical positivists such as Carnap and Ayer wrongly thought). We cannot learn about the ultimate nature of things unless in some sense we already know where to look. But this refusal to admit reducibility is compatible with – even necessitates – conditions for the very existence of metaphysical discourse which are, in a deep sense, contingent. The depth psychology of parent and child – or even such contingent historical factors such as the material and social conditions in ancient Greece when metaphysics first began – may be admitted to play an essential part without in any sense constituting an *unmasking* of metaphysics.

19. Leaving aside such thorny questions, let us survey briefly the relevance of the reality principle to some of the issues we shall be dealing with in this course. Metaphysics, in its traditional *idealist* guise, appears to put the validity of the reality principle in doubt, even as it claims to place that principle at the very cornerstone of its thinking. Metaphysical discourse again and again skirts dangerously close to a withdrawal from objective reality into a world of our own invention, but each time it holds back.

20. According to the 'immaterialist' theory of Bishop Berkeley, for an object in the world to exist is for it to be 'perceived' – only the standard is not my subjective perceptions, nor even the perceptions of any group of people, but God's. It is God's will, for example, that determines that when I gaze at my desk I see the poor, unfinished scraps of the lecture I planned to deliver tomorrow, and not the tidy pile of printed sheets I had hoped for, despite my earnest desire that I could get the work finished and grab some sleep. The reality principle is upheld: wishing won't make it happen, I have got work to do. – Yet one might argue that in reducing objects ultimately to mere perceptions, Berkeley is committed to denying their ultimate *opacity*, their independence from our own selves, indeed their being something *in themselves* rather than merely existing for some conscious being. Reality, for Berkeley, reduces to a *virtual* reality.

21. For certain contemporary philosophers following in the footsteps of Berkeley who style themselves 'anti-realists', the conception of the world as the sum total of objective facts – as in the diary of an imagined recording angel who preserves truths about the past irrespective of our limited capacity to uncover them – is rejected as a mere illusion. The ideal of an immutable truth that stands for all time whether or not we can ever know it is displaced in favour of the practical notions of verification and falsification, and by a methodology of respect for the evidence and for the principles of historical inquiry. Yet anti-realism in no way justifies – or so it is claimed – the kind of wholesale manufacture of historical events so chillingly portrayed in George Orwell's *1984*. Still, it might seem that a vital question is being begged here. What ultimately justifies our adhering to a methodology that forbids tampering with the evidence? Is it merely a matter of consistency? What if we were convinced in a particular case that a little minor tidying up of a messy historical reality served the interests of the promotion of a greater

historical truth? – The internal consistency of our practices cannot, it seems, do better than offer up an *ersatz* historical reality for past-tensed statements to aim at.

22. These are just the opening shots in a long siege where we shall be seeking the truth about truth itself, the reality of reality. What we shall find as we progress in the negative dialectic is that nothing is what it first seems. The preliminary forays against immaterialism or anti-realism soon get to seem as ineffectual as the famous incident when Dr Johnson sought to refute Berkeley by kicking a stone across a church courtyard – as if the physical sensations of bodily movement and contact with a hard object could not equally be construed as mere ‘perceptions’. (By the end of this inquiry, however, we shall have come to see Dr Johnson’s action in a far more constructive light.) Berkeley himself was adamant that common sense was wrong to be offended by his philosophy. Was that merely sophisticated irony? Perhaps. On the first hearing of the definitions of reality offered by the immaterialist or the anti-realist it might seem as if everything has been turned upside down. Yet one soon adjusts with worrying facility. Soon ‘up’ is ‘down’. The very meaning of words like ‘matter’, ‘truth’ and ‘existence’ shift and change as we succumb to the philosophical arguments, until we lose all sense of what the words meant to us originally – if indeed they meant anything at all.