

## What's Metaphysics All About? Amanda Bryant

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When I say “metaphysics”, you might think of that weird new-agey section of the bookstore on crystals, astrology, vibrations, life-changing secrets of the universe, and other silly mumbo-jumbo. Philosophers are interested in a different kind of metaphysics — and while some have thought that it, too, is silly mumbo-jumbo, many of us believe it's a good deal more intellectually serious than the new-agey bookstore kind.

We get the name “metaphysics” from one of Aristotle's editors, who titled a number of his writings “*meta ta phusika*” — literally, “after the physics.” Some questions that we normally consider metaphysical questions are: What sorts of stuff is the world made up of? What does it mean for something to exist? Do numbers exist? Are there universals or forms (is there Catness in addition to particular cats, or Blueness in addition to blue things, or Beauty in addition to beautiful things)? Is reality just in the mind or is there a world outside the mind? Do minds or souls exist? What is the nature of causation? Of time? Do we have free will? And what makes a person a person?

Now, having been told those questions, you might still be a little puzzled as to what metaphysics is about. Don't worry — philosophers are, too. We struggle to articulate a general characterization of metaphysics that both distinguishes it from other forms of inquiry and captures all (or most of) the questions that philosophers take to be metaphysical questions. Precisely how to characterize the aims of metaphysics is itself a hotly debated philosophical topic, belonging to what's now often called *metametaphysics*. Metametaphysics concerns the aims and methods of metaphysics, as well as its tenability as a form of inquiry. (Yes, there could be meta-meta-metaphysics, meta-meta-meta-metaphysics, and so on to infinity, but let's not go there.) Let's do some metametaphysics and consider some views about the aims of metaphysics. What's the point of it? What are metaphysicians trying to accomplish? What's metaphysics really all about?

First, we can distinguish some very general aims that metaphysics might have. It might aim to get us true or justified beliefs about the world, or knowledge or understanding of it. These are what philosophers call *epistemic* aims, which means that they are intellectual or cognitive achievements. Alternatively, metaphysics might have *logical* aims, such as producing consistent theories or logically valid arguments. It could have *aesthetic* aims, like the aim of producing interesting or beautiful theories. It could also have *practical* aims, such as producing useful conceptual tools. Metaphysics might have one or many of these general sorts of aim, and there's a lot that we could say about them. But let's focus on more specific conceptions of the aims of metaphysics, and of what sets it apart from other sorts of inquiry.

## **The Aristotelian View**

One of the first great metaphysicians was Aristotle. Aristotle had several conceptions of what later became known as metaphysics. On one conception, metaphysics is the study of “being *qua* being”. On this view, the goal of metaphysics is to study beings — things in the world — with special attention not to their superficial qualities like colour, shape, size, or smell, but to something more fundamental: their very existence (or the way in which they exist). So Aristotle proceeds by listing a number of categories, or *kinds* of being, and investigating their nature.

This Aristotelian View captures some of metaphysics, but not all of it. For instance, some current metaphysicians argue that the world ultimately contains no objects. But this is a claim about *what exists*, not about *the manner in which* some thing exists. So the Aristotelian View isn't broad enough for our purposes.

## **The Picture View**

We might take a broader view than Aristotle and say that, rather than being after something lofty and strange like *being*, the metaphysician just wants to know about the underlying nature of reality. In fact, this is how most introductory textbooks characterize metaphysics. Let's call this the *Picture View*, because according to it, metaphysics aims to give us a picture of the world, or of the underlying features of reality. Just as pictures represent the world, metaphysical theories try to represent or describe the world accurately.

But many of the natural sciences concern the underlying nature of reality, too — and yet, they aren't typically considered metaphysics. So aiming to represent or describe the underlying nature of reality isn't enough to make an inquiry *metaphysics rather than something else*. It could be that science and metaphysics share the same aim and that what sets them apart is something else — like their methods.

On the other hand, the metaphysician might argue that the sciences deal only in appearances (how things seem). She could argue that scientific theories are meant to explain and predict observed phenomena and are vindicated experimentally to the extent that they *do* explain and predict them, so the scientist is accountable just to the world of appearances. But philosophers have long recognized the possibility that things might not be at all the way they appear to be. For instance, we could all be living in the Matrix. And if we're all stuck in the Matrix, then it won't be science that tells us so. The true metaphysics, on the other hand, would tell us how things *really* are — it would tell us the horrible Matrix-y truth.

## **The Impressionistic Painting View**

If you're not swayed by the Matrix worry and think that *both* scientists and metaphysicians are in the business of describing reality, then we might distinguish metaphysics from science in terms of the kinds of descriptions that scientists and metaphysicians are after. Scientists, we might say,

aim for a super-high-resolution photo of the world. That is, part of the job of the scientist is to give us a bunch of concrete, empirical details about the world, just as a clear photo would. The metaphysician, on the other hand, is not going for those same concrete, empirical details. So she's not exactly a photographer. But on this view, she still wants to represent how things are — it's just that she does so at a higher level of abstraction than the scientist. For instance, while the scientist tells us how hydrochloric acid and sodium hydroxide causally interact and why they interact that way, the metaphysician tries to characterize the nature of causation itself. So rather than a photographer, our metaphysician would be something like an Impressionist painter, giving us a different kind of picture of the world than the scientist.

### **The Inventory View**

Perhaps you aren't worried about distinguishing metaphysics from science — you might think that their aims are roughly continuous and that therefore, rather than working to distinguish them from one another, we should try to tie them more closely to one another. For instance, W.V.O. Quine — one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century, known for his work on language, knowledge, and science, among other things — thought that we should figure out metaphysics by direct appeal to science. He thought, roughly, that we should take our best science and translate it into logical notation, then use it to determine what exists. On his view, the primary aim of metaphysics is to tell us what there is. Call that the Inventory View. While Quine thought that science has an integral role in doing metaphysical inventory, you could certainly hold the Inventory View and think that science has a limited role.

One problem with this view is that only part of metaphysics is dedicated to taking stock of the existing things (we call it *ontology*). A good deal of metaphysics is concerned with other things, like the nature of causation and of personhood.

### **The Structural View**

Some metaphysicians have recently argued, against Quine, that metaphysics is less about inventorying what exists, and more about describing the underlying *structure* of reality. One way of cashing out this notion of structure is in terms of *fundamentality* — to know the structure of reality is to know which things are fundamental, in the sense of not depending on anything else for their existence (for instance, you might think that God is fundamental, or that the stuff studied by fundamental physics is), and which things aren't. At any rate, on the structural conception of metaphysics, we want our metaphysics to tell us how things fit together into a kind of structure.

Note, however, that this conception of metaphysics rests on certain metaphysical assumptions we might not accept. A metaphysician might deny that some things are more fundamental than others, or that reality is structured in any metaphysically interesting or important sense. If so, then the Structural View won't do as a general characterization of metaphysics and its aims.

The views we've looked at so far all give metaphysics pretty lofty epistemic aims — metaphysics is supposed to give us true or justified belief, or knowledge, or understanding of the world, or aspects of it. Some philosophers (like me) think that metaphysics can't hope to meet such lofty epistemic aims, at least not when it operates independently of science. One response would be to deny that metaphysics really does aim to contribute to our knowledge or understanding of how things are. Indeed, some views assign metaphysics humbler goals — like clarifying our everyday concepts, or making our beliefs coherent, or figuring out how things *might* be as opposed to how they *are*. Let's look at these options.

### **The Conceptual Analysis View**

A number of philosophers think that metaphysics aims to identify and clarify our concepts. Metaphysics on this kind of view has to do with how people think and speak, and with the conceptual frameworks underpinning that thought and speech.

Oxford metaphysician and philosopher of language Peter Strawson had a notion of *descriptive metaphysics*, the aim of which is to describe our most fundamental concepts. A related view, known as the Canberra Plan (because of its association with philosophers located in Canberra, Australia), holds that a crucial part of philosophical method is the analysis of our concepts. One proponent of the Canberra Plan, Frank Jackson, claims that we should distinguish two different types or stages of metaphysics: *modest* metaphysics and *serious* metaphysics. *Serious* metaphysics aims to tell us about the world — in particular, whether and how seemingly mysterious things like the mind or free will fit into the natural world. But before we can do that, we've got to figure out what we're talking about when we talk about 'the mind' or 'free will'. That is, our metaphysical questions are framed in terms of certain concepts, and we can't address the questions until we get clear on the concepts. That's what *modest* metaphysics is about — it's about getting our concepts straight. So Jackson's Canberra view distinguishes a preliminary sort of metaphysical task — the task of getting clear on the concepts that frame the metaphysical questions or issues we're interested in — from the secondary task of figuring out how the seemingly mysterious metaphysical stuff fits into the natural world.

### **The Reflective Equilibrium View**

David Lewis, a student of Quine's and one of the most prominent metaphysicians of the late 20th century, agreed that metaphysics partly involves identifying how we think about things, but for him that's just a starting place. We start with our beliefs about the world, then we systematize them. We try to clean up our belief system, to order it, to make it cohere — that is, to remove the inconsistencies and confusions from it. The aim of the metaphysician on this view is to pursue what philosophers call *reflective equilibrium* — to continually examine, reflect on, and revise her beliefs to bring them into fuller alignment with one another.

### **The Possibility View**

While it might be a kind of epistemic or intellectual achievement to make your beliefs cohere with one another, cohering doesn't make them true, and it doesn't mean that you *know* the content of those beliefs. E.J. Lowe, on the other hand, thought that metaphysics does get us knowledge — just not knowledge of what there is. He viewed metaphysics as an inquiry into what there *could* be and how things *might* be, rather than what there is and how things are. In other words, metaphysics tells us primarily about possibilities, not so much about actualities. In fact, he thought that you must figure out what's possible before you can figure out what's actual — and that empirical science therefore depends on metaphysics, or on metaphysical assumptions.

We started with the question: what is metaphysics all about? We've seen that philosophers have entertained lots of answers — metaphysics investigates being *qua* being, develops a picture of the world, abstractly represents the world, tells us what there is, reveals the structure of reality, brings our beliefs into alignment, illuminates our conceptual frameworks, shows us what's possible... And these are just some of the available views! So how should we think of metaphysics? It's possible that no general conception of metaphysics will cover all or most cases of what philosophers take to be metaphysical activity — and if so, we may need a hybrid account that assigns multiple aims to metaphysics. At any rate, the question of what metaphysics is, or what its distinctive aims are, clearly doesn't need to be settled before any metaphysics gets done. So metaphysicians will go on doing metaphysics, and the rest of us can go on trying to figure out just what the hell they're up to.

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