

# Metaphysics

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It is not easy to say what metaphysics is. Ancient and Medieval philosophers might have said that metaphysics was, like chemistry or astrology, to be defined by its subject-matter: metaphysics was the “science” that studied “being as such” or “the first causes of things” or “things that do not change”. It is no longer possible to define metaphysics that way, for two reasons. First, a philosopher who denied the existence of those things that had once been seen as constituting the subject-matter of metaphysics—first causes or unchanging things—would now be considered to be making thereby a metaphysical assertion. Second, there are many philosophical problems that are now considered to be metaphysical problems (or at least partly metaphysical problems) that are in no way related to first causes or unchanging things—the problem of free will, for example, or the problem of the mental and the physical.

The first three sections of this entry examine a broad selection of problems considered to be metaphysical and discuss ways in which the purview of metaphysics has expanded over time. We shall see that the central problems of metaphysics were significantly more unified in the Ancient and Medieval eras. Which raises a question—is there any common feature that unites the problems of contemporary metaphysics? The final two sections discuss some recent theories of the nature and methodology of metaphysics. We will also consider arguments that metaphysics, however defined, is an impossible enterprise.

## 1. The Word ‘Metaphysics’ and the Concept of Metaphysics

The word ‘metaphysics’ is notoriously hard to define. Twentieth-century coinages like ‘meta-language’ and ‘metaphilosophy’ encourage the impression that metaphysics is a study that somehow “goes beyond” physics, a study devoted to matters that transcend the mundane concerns of Newton and Einstein and Heisenberg. This impression is mistaken. The word ‘metaphysics’ is derived from a collective title of the fourteen books by Aristotle that we currently think of as making up Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Aristotle himself did not know the word. (He had four names for the branch of philosophy that is the subject-matter of *Metaphysics*: ‘first philosophy’, ‘first science’, ‘wisdom’, and ‘theology’.) At least one hundred years after Aristotle's death, an editor of his works (in all probability, Andronicus of Rhodes) titled those fourteen books “*Ta meta ta phusika*”—“the after the physicals” or “the ones after the physical ones”—the “physical ones” being the books contained in what we now call Aristotle's *Physics*. The title was probably meant to warn students of Aristotle's philosophy that they should attempt *Metaphysics* only after they had mastered “the physical ones”, the books about nature or the natural world—that is to say, about change, for change is the defining feature of the natural world.

This is the probable meaning of the title because *Metaphysics* is about things that do not change. In one place, Aristotle identifies the subject-matter of first philosophy as “being as such”, and, in another as “first causes”. It is a nice—and vexed—question what the connection between these two definitions is. Perhaps this is the answer: The unchanging first causes have nothing but being in common with the mutable things they cause. Like us and the objects of our experience—they are, and there the resemblance ceases. (For a detailed and informative recent guide to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, see Politis 2004.)

Should we assume that ‘metaphysics’ is a name for that “science” which is the subject-matter of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*? If we assume this, we should be committed to something in the neighborhood of the following theses:

- The subject-matter of metaphysics is “being as such”
- The subject-matter of metaphysics is the first causes of things
- The subject-matter of metaphysics is that which does not change

Any of these three theses might have been regarded as a defensible statement of the subject-matter of what was called ‘metaphysics’ until the seventeenth century. But then, rather suddenly, many topics and problems that Aristotle and the Medievals would have classified as belonging to physics (the relation of mind and body, for example, or the freedom of the will, or personal identity across time) began to be reassigned to metaphysics. One might almost say that in the seventeenth century metaphysics began to be a catch-all category, a repository of philosophical problems that could not be otherwise classified as epistemology, logic, ethics or other branches of philosophy. (It was at about that time that the word ‘ontology’ was invented—to be a name for the science of being as such, an office that the word ‘metaphysics’ could no longer fill.) The academic rationalists of the post-Leibnizian school were aware that the word ‘metaphysics’ had come to be used in a more inclusive sense than it had once been. Christian Wolff attempted to justify this more inclusive sense of the word by this device: while the subject-matter of metaphysics is being, being can be investigated either in general or in relation to objects in particular categories. He distinguished between ‘general metaphysics’ (or ontology), the study of being as such, and the various branches of ‘special metaphysics’, which study the being of objects of various special sorts, such as souls and material bodies. (He does not assign first causes to general metaphysics, however: the study of first causes belongs to natural theology, a branch of special metaphysics.) It is doubtful whether this maneuver is anything more than a verbal ploy. In what sense, for example, is the practitioner of rational psychology (the branch of special metaphysics devoted to the soul) engaged in a study of being? Do souls have a different sort of being from that of other objects?—so that in studying the soul one learns not only about its nature (that is, its properties: rationality, immateriality, immortality, its capacity or lack thereof to affect the body ...), but also about its “mode of being”, and hence learns something about being? It is certainly not true that all, or even very many, rational psychologists said anything, *qua* rational psychologists, that could plausibly be construed as a contribution to our understanding of being.

Perhaps the wider application of the word ‘metaphysics’ was due to the fact that the word ‘physics’ was coming to be a name for a new, quantitative science, the science that bears that name today, and was becoming increasingly inapplicable to the investigation of many traditional philosophical problems about changing things (and of some newly discovered problems about changing things).

Whatever the reason for the change may have been, it would be flying in the face of current usage (and indeed of the usage of the last three or four hundred years) to stipulate that the subject-matter of metaphysics was to be the subject-matter of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. It would, moreover, fly in the face of the fact that there are and have been paradigmatic metaphysicians who deny that there are first causes—this denial is certainly a metaphysical thesis in the current sense—others who insist that everything changes (Heraclitus and any more recent philosopher who is both a materialist and a nominalist), and others still (Parmenides and Zeno) who deny that there is a special class of objects that do not change. In trying to characterize metaphysics as a field, the best starting point is to consider the myriad topics traditionally assigned to it.

## **2. The Problems of Metaphysics: the “Old” Metaphysics**

## 2.1 Being As Such, First Causes, Unchanging Things

If metaphysics now considers a wider range of problems than those studied in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, those original problems continue to belong to its subject-matter. For instance, the topic of “being as such” (and “existence as such”, if existence is something other than being) is one of the matters that belong to metaphysics on any conception of metaphysics. The following theses are all paradigmatically metaphysical:

- “Being is; not-being is not” [Parmenides];
- “Essence precedes existence” [Avicenna, paraphrased];
- “Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone” [St Anselm, paraphrased];
- “Existence is a perfection” [Descartes, paraphrased];
- “Being is a logical, not a real predicate” [Kant, paraphrased];
- “Being is the most barren and abstract of all categories” [Hegel, paraphrased];
- “Affirmation of existence is in fact nothing but denial of the number zero” [Frege];
- “Universals do not exist but rather subsist or have being” [Russell, paraphrased];
- “To be is to be the value of a bound variable” [Quine].

It seems reasonable, moreover, to say that investigations into non-being belong to the topic “being as such” and thus belong to metaphysics. (This did not seem reasonable to Meinong, who wished to confine the subject-matter of metaphysics to “the actual” and who therefore did not regard his Theory of Objects as a metaphysical theory. According to the conception of metaphysics adopted in this article, however, his thesis [paraphrased] “Predication is independent of being” is paradigmatically metaphysical.)

The topics “the first causes of things” and “unchanging things”—have continued to interest metaphysicians, though they are not now seen as having any important connection with the topic “being as such”. The first three of Aquinas's Five Ways are metaphysical arguments on any conception of metaphysics. Additionally the thesis that there are no first causes and the thesis that there are no things that do not change count as metaphysical theses, for in the current conception of metaphysics, the denial of a metaphysical thesis is a metaphysical thesis. No post-Medieval philosopher would say anything like this:

I study the first causes of things, and am therefore a metaphysician. My colleague Dr McZed denies that there are any first causes and is therefore not a metaphysician; she is rather, an anti-metaphysician. In her view, metaphysics is a science with a non-existent subject-matter, like astrology.

This feature of the contemporary conception of metaphysics is nicely illustrated by a statement of Sartre's:

I do not think myself any less a metaphysician in denying the existence of God than Leibniz was in affirming it. (1949: 139)

An anti-metaphysician in the contemporary sense is not a philosopher who denies that there are objects of the sorts that an earlier philosopher might have said formed the subject-matter of metaphysics (first causes, things that do not change, universals, substances, ...), but rather a philosopher who denies the legitimacy of the question whether there are objects of those sorts.

The three original topics—the nature of being; the first causes of things; things that do not change—remained topics of investigation by metaphysicians after Aristotle. Another topic occupies an intermediate position between Aristotle and his successors. We may call this topic

## 2.2 Categories of Being and Universals

We human beings sort things into various classes. And we often suppose that the classes into which we sort things enjoy a kind of internal unity. In this respect they differ from sets in the strict sense of the word. (And no doubt in others. It would seem, for example, that we think of the classes we sort things into—biological species, say—as comprising different members at different times.) The classes into which we sort things are in most cases “natural” classes, classes whose membership is in some important sense uniform—“kinds”. We shall not attempt an account or definition of ‘natural class’ here. Examples must suffice. There are certainly sets whose members do not make up natural classes: a set that contains all dogs but one, and a set that contains all dogs and exactly one cat do not correspond to natural classes in anyone's view. And it is tempting to suppose that there is a sense of “natural” in which dogs make up a natural class, to suppose that in dividing the world into dogs and non-dogs, we “cut nature at the joints”. It is, however, a respectable philosophical thesis that the idea of a natural class cannot survive philosophical scrutiny. If that respectable thesis is true, the topic “the categories of being” is a pseudo-topic. Let us simply assume that the respectable thesis is false and that things fall into various natural classes—hereinafter, simply classes.

Some of the classes into which we sort things are more comprehensive than others: all dogs are animals, but not all animals are dogs; all animals are living organisms, but not all living organisms are animals .... Now the very expression “sort things into classes” suggests that there is a most comprehensive class: the class of things, the class of things that can be sorted into classes. But is this so?—and if it is so, are there classes that are “just less comprehensive” than this universal class? If there are, can we identify them?—and are there a vast (perhaps even an infinite) number of them, or some largish, messy number like forty-nine, or some small, neat number like seven or four? Let us call any such less comprehensive classes the ‘categories of being’ or the ‘ontological categories’. (The former term, if not the latter, presupposes a particular position on one question about the nature of being: that everything is, that the universal class is the class of beings, the class of things that are. It thus presupposes that Meinong was wrong to say that “there are things of which it is true that there are no such things”.)

The topic “the categories of being” is intermediate between the topic “the nature of being” and the topics that fall under the post-Medieval conception of metaphysics for a reason that can be illustrated by considering the problem of universals. Universals, if they indeed exist, are, in the first instance, properties or qualities or attributes (i.e., “ductility” or “whiteness”) that are supposedly universally “present in” the members of classes of things and relations (i.e., “being to the north of”) that are supposedly universally present in the members of classes of sequences of things. “In the first instance”: it may be that things other than qualities and relations are universals, although qualities and relations are the items most commonly put forward as examples of universals. It may be that the novel *War and Peace* is a universal, a thing that is in some mode present in each of the many tangible copies of the novel. It may be that the word “horse” is a universal, a thing that is present in each of the many audible utterances of the word. And it may be that natural classes or kinds are themselves universals—it may be that there is such a thing as “the horse” or the species *Equus caballus*, distinct from its defining attribute “being a horse” or “equinity”, and in some sense “present in” each horse. (Perhaps some difference between the attribute “being a horse” and the attribute “being either a horse or a kitten” explains why the former is the defining attribute of a kind and the latter is not. Perhaps the former attribute exists and the latter does not; perhaps the former

has the second-order attribute “naturalness” and the latter does not; perhaps the former is more easily apprehended by the intellect than the latter.)

The thesis that universals exist—or at any rate “subsist” or “have being”—is variously called ‘realism’ or ‘Platonic realism’ or ‘platonism’. All three terms are objectionable. Aristotle believed in the reality of universals, but it would be at best an oxymoron to call him a platonist or a Platonic realist. And ‘realism’ tout court has served as a name for a variety of philosophical theses. The thesis that universals do not exist—do not so much as subsist; have no being of any sort—is generally called ‘nominalism’. This term, too is objectionable. At one time, those who denied the existence of universals were fond of saying things like:

There is no such thing as “being a horse”: there is only the name [*nomen*, gen. *nominis*] “horse”, a mere *flatus vocis* [puff of sound].

Present-day nominalists, however, are aware, if earlier nominalists were not, that if the phrase ‘the name “horse”’ designated an object, the object it designated would itself be a universal or something very like one. It would not be a mere puff of sound but would rather be what was common to the many puffs of sound that were its tokens.

The old debate between the nominalists and the realists continues to the present day. Most realists suppose that universals constitute one of the categories of being. This supposition could certainly be disputed without absurdity. Perhaps there is a natural class of things to which all universals belong but which contains other things as well (and is not the class of all things). Perhaps, for example, numbers and propositions are not universals, and perhaps numbers and propositions and universals are all members of a class of “abstract objects”, a class that some things do not belong to. Or perhaps there is such a thing as “the whiteness of the Taj Mahal” and perhaps this object and the universal “whiteness”—but not the Taj Mahal itself—both belong to the class of “properties”. Let us call such a class—a proper subclass of an ontological category, a natural class that is neither the class of all things nor one of the ontological categories—an ‘ontological sub-category’. It may indeed be that universals make up a sub-category of being and are members of the category of being “abstract object”. But few if any philosophers would suppose that universals were members of forty-nine sub-categories—much less of a vast number or an infinity of sub-categories. Most philosophers who believe in the reality of universals would want to say that universals, if they do not constitute an ontological category, at least constitute one of the “higher” sub-categories. If dogs form a natural class, this class is—by the terms of our definition—an ontological sub-category. And this class will no doubt be a subclass of many sub-categories: the genus *canis*, the class (in the biological sense) *mammalia*, ..., and so through a chain of sub-categories that eventually reaches some very general sub-category like “substance” or “material object”. Thus, although dogs may compose an ontological sub-category, this sub-category—unlike the category “universal”—is one of the “lower” ones. These reflections suggest that the topic “the categories of being” should be understood to comprehend both the categories of being *sensu stricto* and their immediate sub-categories.

Does the topic “the categories of being” belong to metaphysics in the “old” sense? A case can be made for saying that it does, based on the fact that Plato's theory of forms (universals, attributes) is a recurrent theme in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. In *Metaphysics*, two of Plato's central theses about the forms come in for vigorous criticism: (i) that things that would, if they existed, be “inactive” (the forms) could be the primary beings, the “most real” things, and (ii) that the attributes of things exist “separately” from the things whose attributes they are. We shall be concerned only with (ii). In the terminology of the Schools, that criticism can be put this way: Plato wrongly believed that universals existed *ante res* (prior to objects); the correct view is that universals exist *in rebus* (in

objects). It is because this aspect of the problem of universals—whether universals exist *ante res* or *in rebus*—is discussed at length in *Metaphysics*, that a strong case can be made for saying that the problem of universals falls under the old conception of metaphysics. (And the question whether universals, given that they exist at all, exist *ante res* or *in rebus* is as controversial in the twenty-first century as it was in the thirteenth century and the fourth century B.C.E.) If we do decide that the problem of universals belongs to metaphysics on the old conception, then, since we have liberalized the old conception by applying to it the contemporary rule that the denial of a metaphysical position is to be regarded as a metaphysical position, we shall have to say that the question whether universals exist at all is a metaphysical question under the old conception—and that nominalism is therefore a metaphysical thesis.

There is, however, also a case to be made against classifying the problem of universals as a problem of metaphysics in the (liberalized) old sense. For there is more to the problem of universals than the question whether universals exist and the question whether, if they do exist, their existence is *ante res* or *in rebus*. For example, the problem of universals also includes questions about the relation between universals (if such there be) and the things that are not universals, the things usually called particulars. Aristotle did not consider these questions in the *Metaphysics*. One might therefore plausibly contend that only one part of the problem of universals (the part that pertains to the existence and nature of universals) belongs to metaphysics in the old sense. At one time, a philosopher might have said,

The universal “doghood” is a thing that does not change. Therefore, questions about its nature belong to metaphysics, the science of things that do not change. But dogs are things that change. Therefore, questions concerning the relation of dogs to doghood do not belong to metaphysics.

But no contemporary philosopher would divide the topics that way—not even if he or she believed that doghood existed and was a thing that did not change. A contemporary philosopher—if that philosopher concedes that there is any problem that can properly be called “the problem of universals”—will see the problem of universals as a problem properly so called, as a problem having the kind of internal unity that leads philosophers to speak of *a* philosophical problem. And the same point applies to the topic “the categories of being”: every philosopher who is willing to say that “What are the categories of being?” is a meaningful question will assign every aspect of that question to metaphysics

Let us consider some aspects of the problem of universals that concern changing things. (That is, that concern particulars—for even if there are particulars that do not change, most of the particulars that figure in discussions of the problem of universals as examples are things that change.) Consider two white particulars—the Taj Mahal, say, and the Washington Monument. And suppose that both these particulars are white in virtue of (i.e., their being white consists in) their bearing some one, identifiable relation to the universal “whiteness”. Suppose further that we are able to single out this relation by some sort of act of intellectual attention or abstraction, and that (having done so) we have given it the name “falling under”. All white things and only white things fall under whiteness, and falling under whiteness is what it is to be white. (We pass over many questions that would have to be addressed if we were discussing the problem of universals for its own sake. For example, both blueness and redness are spectral color-properties, and whiteness is not. Does this fact imply that “being a spectral color-property” is, as one might say, a second-order universal? If so, does blueness “fall under” this universal in the same sense as the sense in which a copy of *Philosophical Studies* falls under blueness?)

Now what can we say about this relation, this “falling under”? What is it about the two objects whiteness and the Taj Mahal that is responsible for the fact that the latter falls under the former? Is

the Taj perhaps a “bundle” of *universalia ante res*, and does it fall under whiteness in virtue of the fact that whiteness is one of the universals that is a constituent of the bundle that it is? Or might it be that a particular like the Taj, although it indeed has universals as constituents, is something more than its universal constituents? Might it be that the Taj has a constituent that is not a universal, a “substrate”, a particular that is in some sense property-less and that holds the universal constituents of the Taj together—that “bundles” them? (If we take that position, then we may want to say, with Armstrong (1989: 94–96), that the Taj is a ‘thick particular’ and its substrate a ‘thin particular’: a thick particular being a thin particular taken together with the properties it bundles.) Or might the Taj have constituents that are neither universals nor substrates? Might we have been too hasty when we defined ‘particulars’ as things that are not universals? Could there perhaps be two kinds of non-universals, concrete non-universals or concrete individuals (those would be the particulars, thick or thin), and abstract non-universals or abstract individuals (‘accidents’ or ‘tropes’ or ‘property instances’), things that are properties or qualities (and relations as well), things like “the (individual) whiteness of the Taj Mahal”? Is the Taj perhaps a bundle not of universals but of accidents? Or is it composed of a substrate and a bundle of accidents? And we cannot neglect the possibility that Aristotle was right and that universals exist only *in rebus*. If that is so, we must ask what the relation is between the matter that composes a particular and the universals that inhere in it—that inhere simultaneously in “this” matter and in “that” matter.

The series of questions that was set out in the preceding paragraph was introduced by observing that the problem of universals includes both questions about the existence and nature of universals and questions about how universals are related to the particulars that fall under them. Many of the theories that were alluded to in that series of questions could be described as theories of the “ontological structure” of non-universals. We can contrast ontological structure with mereological structure. A philosophical question concerns the mereological structure of an object if it is a question about the relation between that object and those of its constituents that belong to the same ontological category as the object. For example, the philosopher who asks whether the Taj Mahal has a certain block of marble among its constituents essentially or only accidentally is asking a question about the mereological structure of the Taj, since the block and the building belong to the same ontological category. But the philosopher who asks whether the Taj has “whiteness” as a constituent and the philosopher who supposes that the Taj does have this property-constituent and asks, “What is the nature of this relation ‘constituent of’ that ‘whiteness’ bears to the Taj?” are asking questions about its ontological structure.

Many philosophers have supposed that particulars fall under universals by somehow incorporating them into their ontological structure. And other philosophers have supposed that the ontological structure of a particular incorporates individual properties or accidents—and that an accident is an accident of a certain particular just in virtue of being a constituent of that particular.

Advocates of the existence of *ante res* universals, and particularly those who deny that these universals are constituents of particulars, tend to suppose that universals abound—that there is not only such a universal as whiteness but such a universal as “being both white and round and either shiny or not made of silver”. Advocates of other theories of universals are almost always less liberal in the range of universals whose existence they will allow. The advocate of *in rebus* universals is unlikely to grant the existence of “being both white and round and either shiny or not made of silver”, even in the case in which there is an object that is both white and round and either shiny or not made of silver (such as a non-shiny white plastic ball).

The two topics “the categories of being” and “the ontological structure of objects” are intimately related to each other and to the problem of universals. It is not possible to propose a solution to the problem of universals that does not have implications for the topic “the categories of being”. (Even

nominalism implies that at least one popular candidate for the office “ontological category” is non-existent or empty.) It is certainly possible to maintain that there are ontological categories that are not directly related to the problem of universals (“proposition”, “state of affairs”, “event”, “mere *possibile*”), but any philosopher who maintains this will nevertheless maintain that if there are universals they make up at least one of the higher ontological sub-categories. And it seems that it is possible to speak of ontological structure only if one supposes that there are objects of different ontological categories. So whatever metaphysics comprehends, it must comprehend every aspect of the problem of universals and every aspect of the topics “the categories of being” and “the ontological structure of objects”. For a recent investigation of the problems that have been discussed in this section, see Lowe (2006).

We turn now to a topic that strictly speaking belongs to “the categories of being”, but which is important enough to be treated separately.

## 2.3 Substance

Some things (if they exist at all) are present only “in” other things: a smile, a haircut (product, not process), a hole .... Such things may be opposed to things that exist “in their own right”. Metaphysicians call the things that exist in their own right ‘substances’. Aristotle called them ‘*protai ousiai*’ or “primary beings”. They make up the most important of his ontological categories. Several features define *protai ousiai*: they are subjects of predication that cannot themselves be predicated of things (they are not universals); things exist “in” them, but they do not exist “in” things (they are not accidents like Socrates' wisdom or his ironic smile); they have determinate identities (essences). This last feature could be put this way in contemporary terms: if the *prote ousia x* exists at a certain time and the *prote ousia y* exists at some other time, it makes sense to ask whether *x* and *y* are the same, are numerically identical (and the question must have a determinate answer); and the question whether a given *prote ousia* would exist in some set of counterfactual circumstances must likewise have an answer (at least if the circumstances are sufficiently determinate—if, for example, they constitute a possible world. More on this in the next section). It is difficult to suppose that smiles or holes have this sort of determinate identity. To ask whether the smile Socrates smiled today is the smile he smiled yesterday (or is the smile he would have smiled if Crito had asked one of his charmingly naïve questions) can only be a question about descriptive identity.

Aristotle uses ‘(*prote*) *ousia*’ not only as a count-noun but as a mass term. (He generally writes ‘*ousia*’ without qualification when he believes that the context will make it clear that he means ‘*prote ousia*’.) For example, he not only asks questions like “Is Socrates a (*prote*) *ousia*?” and “What is a (*prote*) *ousia*?”, but questions like “What is the (*prote*) *ousia* of Socrates?” and “What is (*prote*) *ousia*?” (Which question he is asking sometimes has to be inferred from the context, since there is no indefinite article in Greek.) In the count-noun sense of the term, Aristotle identifies at least some (*protai*) *ousiai* with *ta hupokeimena* or “underlying things”. Socrates, for example, is a *hupokeimenon* in that he “lies under” the *in rebus* universals under which he falls and the accidents that inhere in him. ‘*To hupokeimenon*’ has an approximate Latin equivalent in ‘*substantia*’, “that which stands under”. (Apparently, “to stand under” and “to lie under” are equally good metaphorical descriptions of the relations a thing bears to its qualities and accidents.) Owing both to the close association of (*protai*) *ousiai* and *hupokeimena* in Aristotle's philosophy and to the absence a suitable Latin equivalent of ‘*ousia*’ ‘*substantia*’ became the customary Latin translation of the count-noun ‘(*prote*) *ousia*’.

The question whether there in fact are substances continues to be one of the central questions of metaphysics. Several closely related questions are: How, precisely, should the concept of substance



be understood?; Which of the items (if any of them) among those we encounter in everyday life are substances?; If there are substances at all, how many of them are there?—is there only one as Spinoza contended, or are there many as most of the rationalists supposed?; What kinds of substances are there?—are there immaterial substances, eternal substances, necessarily existent substances?

It must be emphasized that there is no universally accepted and precise definition of ‘substance’. Depending on how one understood the word (or the concept) one might say either that Hume denied that there were any substances or that he held that the only substances (or the only substances of which we have any knowledge) were impressions and ideas. It would seem, however, that most philosophers who are willing to use the word ‘substance’ at all would deny that any of the following (if they exist) are substances:

- Universals and other abstract objects. (It should be noted that Aristotle criticized Plato for supposing that the *protai ousiai* were *ante res* universals.)
- Events, processes, or changes. (But some metaphysicians contend that substance/event is a false dichotomy.)
- Stuffs, such as flesh or iron or butter. (Unfortunately for beginning students of metaphysics, the usual meaning of ‘substance’ outside philosophy is stuff. Aristotle criticized “the natural philosophers” for supposing that the *prote ousia* could be a stuff—water or air or fire or matter.)

The nature of being, the problem of universals, and the nature of substance have been recognized as topics that belong to “metaphysics” by almost everyone who has used the word. We now turn to topics that belong to metaphysics only in the post-Medieval sense.