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Metaphysics, the philosophical study whose object is to determine the real nature of things—to determine the meaning, structure, and principles of whatever is insofar as it is. Although this study is popularly conceived as referring to anything excessively subtle and highly theoretical and although it has been subjected to many criticisms, it is presented by metaphysicians as the most fundamental and most comprehensive of inquiries, inasmuch as it is concerned with reality as a whole.

Nature and scope of metaphysics

Before considering any such question, however, it is necessary to examine, without particular historical references, some ways in which actual metaphysicians have attempted to characterize their enterprise, noticing in each case the problems they have in drawing a clear line between their aims and those of the practitioners of the exact and empirical sciences. Four views will be briefly considered; they present metaphysics as: (1) an inquiry into what exists, or what really exists; (2) the science of reality, as opposed to appearance; (3) the study of the world as a whole; (4) a theory of first principles. Reflection on what is said under the different heads will quickly establish that they are not sharply separate from one another, and, indeed, individual metaphysical writers sometimes [invoke](#) more than one of these phrases when asked to say what metaphysics is—as, for example, the British Idealist F.H. Bradley does in the opening pages of his work *Appearance and Reality* (1893).

An inquiry into what exists

A common set of claims on behalf of metaphysics is that it is an inquiry into what [exists](#); its business is to subject common opinion on this matter to critical scrutiny and in so doing to determine what is truly real.

It can be asserted with some confidence that common opinion is certainly an unreliable guide about what exists, if indeed it can be induced to pronounce on this matter at all. Are dream objects real, in the way in which [palpable](#) realities such as chairs and trees are? Are numbers real, or should they be described as no more than abstractions? Is the height of a man a reality in the same sense in which he is a reality, or is it just an aspect of something more [concrete](#), a mere quality that has derivative rather than substantial being and could not exist except as attributed to something else? It is easy enough to confuse the common man with questions like these and to show that any answers he gives to them tend to be ill thought-out. It is equally difficult, however, for the metaphysician to come up with more satisfactory answers of his own. Many metaphysicians have relied, in this connection, on the internally related notions of substance, [quality](#), and [relation](#); they have argued that only what is substantial truly exists, although every substance has qualities and stands in relation to other substances. Thus, this tree is tall and deciduous and is precisely 50 yards north of that fence. Difficulties begin, however, as soon as examples like these are taken seriously. Assume for the moment that an individual tree—what might be called a concrete existent—qualifies for the title of substance; it is just the sort of thing that has qualities and stands in relations. Unless there were substances in this sense, no qualities could be real: the tallness of the tree would not exist unless the tree existed. The question can now be raised what the tree would be if it were deprived of all its qualities and stood in no relations. The notion of a substance in this type of metaphysics is that of a thing that exists by itself, apart from any attributes it may happen to possess; the difficulty with this notion is to know how to apply it. Any concrete thing one selects to exemplify the notion of substance turns out in practice to answer a certain description; this means in effect that it cannot be spoken of apart from its attributes. It thus emerges that substances are no more

primary beings than are qualities and relations; without the former one could not have the latter, but equally without the latter one could not have the former.

There are other difficulties about substance that cannot be explored here—*e.g.*, whether a fence is a substance or simply wood and metal shaped in a certain way. Enough has already been said, however, to indicate the problems involved in defining the tasks of metaphysics along these lines. There is, nevertheless, an alternative way of understanding the notion of substance: not as that which is the ultimate subject of [predicates](#) but as what persists through change. The question “What is ultimately real?” is, thus, a question about the ultimate stuff of which the [universe](#) is made up. Although this second [conception](#) of substance is both clearer and more readily applicable than its predecessor, the difficulty about it from the metaphysician’s point of view is that it sets him in direct rivalry with the scientist. When the early Greek philosopher [Thales](#) inquired as to what is ultimately real and came up with the surprising news that all is water, he might be taken as advancing a scientific rather than a philosophical [hypothesis](#). Although it is true that later writers, such as [Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz](#), a German Rationalist philosopher and mathematician, were fully aware of the force of scientific claims in this area and, nevertheless, rejected them as metaphysically unacceptable, the fact remains that the nonphilosopher finds it difficult to understand the basis on which a Leibniz rests his case. When Leibniz said that it is [monads](#) (*i.e.*, elementary, unextended, indivisible, spiritual substances that enter into composites) that are the true atoms of nature and not, for example, material particles, the objection can be raised as to what right he has to advance this opinion. Has he done any scientific work to justify him in setting scientific results aside with such confidence? And if he has not, why should he be taken seriously at all?

The science of ultimate reality

To answer these questions, another description of metaphysics has been proposed: that it is the [science](#) that seeks to define what is ultimately real as opposed to what is merely apparent.

The contrast between [appearance](#) and reality, however, is by no means peculiar to metaphysics. In everyday life people distinguish between the real size of the Sun and its apparent size, or again between the real colour of an object (when seen in standard conditions) and its apparent colour (nonstandard conditions). A cloud appears to consist of some white, fleecy substance, although in reality it is a concentration of drops of water. In general, men are often (though not invariably) inclined to allow that the scientist knows the real constitution of things as opposed to the surface aspects with which ordinary men are familiar. It will not [suffice](#) to define metaphysics as knowledge of reality as opposed to appearance; scientists, too, claim to know reality as opposed to appearance, and there is a general tendency to concede their claim.

It seems that there are at least three components in the metaphysical conception of reality. One characteristic, which has already been illustrated by Plato, is that reality is genuine as opposed to deceptive. The ultimate realities that the metaphysician seeks to know are precisely things as they are—simple and not variegated, exempt from change and therefore stable objects of knowledge. Plato’s own assumption of this position perhaps reflects certain confusions about the knowability of things that change; one should not, however, on that ground exclude this aspect of the concept of reality from metaphysical thought in general. Ultimate reality, whatever else it is, is genuine as opposed to sham. Second, reality is original in contrast to derivative, self-dependent rather than dependent on the existence of something else. When Aristotle sought to inquire into the most real of all things, or when [medieval](#) philosophers attempted to establish the characteristics of what they called the *ens realissimum* (“the most real being”), or the original and perfect being, they were looking for something that, in contrast to the everyday things of this world, was truly self-contained and could accordingly be looked

upon as self-caused. Likewise, the 17th-century [Rationalists](#) defined substance as that which can be explained through itself alone. Writers like [René Descartes](#) and [Benedict de Spinoza](#) were convinced that it was the task of the metaphysician to seek for and characterize substance understood in this sense; the more [mundane](#) substances with which physical scientists were concerned were, in their opinion, only marginally relevant in this inquiry. Third, and perhaps most important, reality for the metaphysician is intelligible as opposed to [opaque](#). Appearances are not only deceptive and derivative, they also make no sense when taken at their own level. To arrive at what is ultimately real is to produce an account of the facts that does them full [justice](#). The assumption is, of course, that one cannot explain things satisfactorily if one remains within the world of common sense, or even if one advances from that world to embrace the concepts of science. One or the other of these levels of [explanation](#) may suffice to produce a sort of local sense that is enough for practical purposes or that forms an adequate basis on which to make predictions. Practical reliability of this kind, however, is very different from theoretical satisfaction; the task of the metaphysician is to challenge all assumptions and finally arrive at an account of the nature of things that is fully [coherent](#) and fully thought-out.

It should be obvious that, to establish his right to pronounce on what is ultimately real in the sense analyzed, the metaphysician has a tremendous amount to do. He must begin by giving colour to his claim that everyday ways of thinking will not suffice for a full and coherent description of what falls within experience, thus arguing that appearances are unreal—although not therefore nonexistent—because they are unstable and unintelligible. This involves a challenge to the final acceptability of such well-worn ideas as time and [space](#), thing and attribute, change and process—a challenge that metaphysicians have not hesitated to make, even though it has been treated with [skepticism](#) both by ordinary men and by some of their fellow philosophers (*e.g.*, G.E. Moore, a 20th-century British thinker who has greatly influenced modern [Analytic](#) philosophy). Second, granted that there are contradictions or incoherences in the thought of common sense, the metaphysician must go on to maintain that they cannot be resolved by deserting common sense for science. He will not deny that the concepts of science are in many respects different from those of everyday thought; to take one aspect only, they are altogether more precise and sharply defined. They permit the scientist to introduce into his descriptions a theoretical content that is lacking at the everyday level and in so doing to unify and render intelligible aspects of the world that seem opaque when considered singly. The metaphysician will argue, however, that this desirable result is purchased at a certain price: by ignoring certain appearances altogether. The scientist, in this way of thinking, does not offer a truer description of the phenomena of which ordinary thought could make no sense but merely gives a connected description of a selected set of phenomena. The world of the scientist, restricted as it is to what can be dealt with in quantitative terms, is a poor thing in comparison with the rich if untidy world of everyday life. Alternatively, the metaphysician must try to show that scientific concepts are like the concepts of common sense in being ultimately incoherent. The [premises](#) or presuppositions that the scientist accepts contain unclarities that cannot be resolved, although they are not so serious as to prevent his achieving results that are practically dependable. Many ingenious arguments on these lines have been produced by philosophers, by no means all of whom could be said to be incapable of a true understanding of the theories they were criticizing. (Leibniz, for example, was a physicist of distinction as well as a mathematician of genius; G.W.F. Hegel, a 19th-century German Idealist, had an unusual knowledge of contemporary scientific work; and [Alfred North Whitehead](#), a pioneer of 20th-century metaphysics in the Anglo-Saxon world, was a professor of applied mathematics, and his system developed from physics and contained a wealth of biological ideas.) The fact remains, nevertheless, that few if any practicing scientists have been seriously troubled by such arguments.

Even if the metaphysician were thus able to make good the negative side of his case, he would still face the [formidable](#) difficulty of establishing that there is something answering to his conception of what is ultimately real and of identifying it. The notion of an original being, totally self-contained and totally

self-intelligible, may not itself be coherent, as the 18th-century British philosopher David Hume and others have argued; alternatively, there may be special difficulties in saying to what it applies. The fact that different metaphysicians have given widely different accounts of what is ultimately real is certainly suspicious. Some have wanted to say that there is a plurality of ultimately real things, others that there is only one; some have argued that what is truly real must be utterly [transcendent](#) of the things of this world and occupy a supersensible realm accessible only to the pure intellect, while others have thought of ultimate reality as immanent in experience (the Hegelian Absolute, for example, is not a special sort of existent, but the world as a whole understood in a certain way). That metaphysical inquiry should issue in definitive doctrine, as so many of those who engaged in it said that it would, is in these circumstances altogether too much to hope for.

The science of the world as a whole

Another way in which metaphysicians have sought to define their discipline is by saying that it has to do with the world as a whole.

The [implications](#) of this phrase are not immediately obvious. Clearly, a contrast is intended in the first place with the various departmental sciences, each of which selects a portion or aspect of reality for study and confines itself to that. No geologist or mathematician would claim that his study is absolutely comprehensive; each would concede that there are many aspects of the world that he leaves out, even though he covers everything that is relevant to his special point of view. By contrast, it might be supposed that the metaphysician is merely to coordinate the results of the special sciences. There is clearly a need for the coordination of scientific results because scientific research has become increasingly specialized and departmentalized; individual scientific workers need to be made aware of what is going on in other fields, sometimes because these fields impinge on their own, sometimes because results obtained there have wider implications of which they need to take account. One can scarcely see metaphysicians, however, or indeed philosophers generally, performing this function of [intellectual](#) contact man in a satisfactory fashion. It might then be supposed that their concern with the world as a whole is to be interpreted as a summing up and synthesizing of the results of the particular sciences. Plato spoke of the philosopher as taking a synoptic view, and there is often talk about the need to see things in the round and avoid the narrowness of the average specialist, who, it is said, knows more and more about less and less. If, however, it is a question of looking at scientific results from a wider point of view and so of producing what might be called a scientific picture of the world, the person best qualified for the job is not any philosopher but rather a scientist of large mind and wide interests. Metaphysics cannot be satisfactorily understood as an account of the world as a whole if that description suggests that the metaphysician is a sort of superscientist, unlimited in his curiosity and gifted with a capacity for putting together other people's findings with a skill and imagination that none of them individually commands. Only a scientist could hope to become such a superscientist.

More hope for the metaphysician can be found, perhaps, along the following lines. People want to know not only what the scientist makes of the world but also what significance to assign to his account. People experience the world at different levels and in different capacities: they are not only investigators but also agents; they have a [moral](#) and a legal, an [aesthetic](#) and a religious life in addition to their scientific life. Man is a many-sided being; he needs to understand the universe in the light of his different activities and experiences. There are philosophers who appear to find no problem here; they argue that there can be no possibility of, say, a moral or a religious vision of the world that rivals the scientific vision. In this view, [morals](#) and religion are matters of practice, not of theory; they do not rival science but only complement it. This neutralist attitude, however, finds little general favour; for most thinking people find it necessary to choose whether to go all the way with science, at the cost of abandoning religion and even morals, or to stick to a religious or moral world outlook even if it means treating scientific claims with some reserve. The practice of the moral life is often believed to proceed on assumptions that can hardly be accepted if science is taken to have the last word about what is true.

Accordingly, it becomes necessary to produce some rational [assessment](#) of the [truth](#) claims of the different forms of experience, to try to think out a scheme in which [justice](#) is done to them all. Many familiar systems of metaphysics profess to do just that; among others there are Materialism, which favours the claims of science; Idealism, which sees deeper truth in religion and the moral life; and the peculiar [dualism](#) of the 18th-century German philosopher [Immanuel Kant](#), which holds that science gives the truth about phenomena, while reserving a [noumenal](#), or supersensible, sphere for moral agency.

This conception of metaphysics as offering an account of the world or, as is more often said, of experience as a whole, accords more obviously with the position of those who see ultimate reality as immanent, or [inherent](#) in what is immediately known, than of those who take it to be transcendent, or beyond the limits of ordinary experience. It is possible, in fact, to subscribe to the legitimacy of metaphysics as so understood without postulating the existence of any special entities known only to the metaphysician—a claim that plain men have often taken to connect metaphysics with the occult. This is not to say, of course, that metaphysical problems admit of easy solutions when understood along these lines. There is a variety of widely different ways of taking the world as a whole: depending on which aspect or aspects of experience the individual metaphysician finds especially significant; each claims to be comprehensive and to confute the claims of its rivals, yet none has succeeded in establishing itself as the obviously correct account. Even systems that are widely condemned as impossible, such as Materialism, turn out in practice to command constantly renewed support as new discoveries in the sciences suggest new ways of dealing with old difficulties. A cynic might take such facts as meaning that people subscribe to theories of this sort more as a matter of emotional than of rational conviction; metaphysics, as [Bradley](#) remarked with surprising frankness, consists in the finding of bad reasons for what one believes upon instinct.

The science of first principles

Another phrase used by Bradley in his preliminary discussion of metaphysics is “the study of [first principles](#),” or ultimate, irrefutable truths.

Metaphysics could be said to provide a theory of first principles if it furnished men with a set of concepts in the light of which they could arrive at the connected account of experience as a whole just spoken of, and the two descriptions of the subject would thus be two sides of a single coin. The [idea](#) that metaphysics has to do with first principles, however, has wider implications.

The term “first principles” is a translation of the Greek word *archai*. An arche is something from which an argument proceeds—it can be either a primary [premise](#) or an ultimate presupposition. Plato, in a famous passage in *Politeia* (*The Republic*), contrasted two different attitudes to archai: namely that of the [mathematician](#), who lays down or hypothesizes certain things as being true and then proceeds to deduce their consequences without further examining their validity; and that of the [dialectician](#), who proceeds backward, not forward, from his primary premises and then seeks to ground them in an arche that is not hypothesized at all. Unfortunately, no concrete details exist of the way in which Plato himself thought this program could be carried out; instead he spoke of it only in the most general terms. The suggestion, nevertheless, that metaphysics is superior to any other intellectual discipline in having a fully critical attitude toward its first principles is one that still continues to be made, and it needs some examination.

As regards mathematics, for example, it might be said that mathematicians could be uncritical about the first principles of their science in the following ways: (1) They might take as self-evidently true or universally applicable some axiom or primary premise that turned out later not to possess this property. (2) They might assume among their first principles certain propositions about existence—to the effect that only certain kinds of things could be proper objects of mathematical inquiry (rational as opposed

to irrational numbers, for example)—and time might indeed reveal that the assumption was inappropriate. The remedy for both sorts of error, however, is to be found within the realm of mathematics itself; the development of the discipline has consisted precisely in eliminating mistakes of this kind. It is not clear even that the discovery and removal of antinomies in the [foundations of mathematics](#) is work for the metaphysician, although philosophically minded persons like [Gottlob Frege](#), a German mathematician and logician, and [Bertrand Russell](#), perhaps the best known English philosopher of the 20th century, have been much concerned with them. The situation is not fundamentally different when the empirical sciences are considered. Admittedly, the exponents of these sciences give more hostages to fortune insofar as they have to assume from the first the general correctness of the results of other disciplines; there can be no question of their checking on these for themselves. Mathematicians, too, begin by assuming the validity of common argument forms without making any serious attempt to validate them, and there is nothing seriously wrong with their proceeding in this manner. If confidence in bad logic has sometimes been responsible for holding up mathematical advance, bolder mathematicians have always known in practice that the right thing to do is to let the argument take them wherever it will on strictly mathematical lines, leaving it to logicians to recognize the fact and adjust their theory at their convenience.

It thus seems that the assertion that a special science like mathematics is uncritical about its archai is false; there is a sense in which mathematicians are constantly strengthening their basic premises. As regards the corresponding claim about metaphysics, it has at one time or another been widely believed (1) that it is the business of metaphysics to justify the ultimate assumptions of the sciences, and (2) that in metaphysics alone there are no unjustified assumptions. Concerning (1), the question that needs to be asked is how the justification is supposed to take place. It has been argued that the metaphysician might, on one interpretation of his function, be said to offer some defense of science generally by placing it in relation to other forms of experience. To do this, however, is not to justify any particular scientific assumptions. In point of fact, particular scientific assumptions get their justification, if anywhere, when a move is made from a narrower to a more comprehensive science; what is assumed in geology, for example, may be proved in physics. But this, of course, has nothing to do with metaphysics. The difficulty with (2) is that of knowing how any intellectual activity, however carefully conducted, could be free of basic assumptions. Some metaphysicians (such as Bradley and his Scottish predecessor [J.F. Ferrier](#)) have claimed that there is a difference between their discipline and others insofar as metaphysical propositions alone are self-reinstating. For example, the Cartesian proposition *cogito, ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) is self-reinstating: deny that you think, and in so doing you think; deny that you exist, and the very fact gives [proof](#) of your existence. Even if it could be made out that propositions of this kind are peculiar to metaphysics, however, it would not follow that everything in metaphysics has this character. The truth is, rather, that no [paradox](#) is involved in denying most fundamental metaphysical claims, such as the assertion of the Materialist that there is nothing that cannot be satisfactorily explained in material terms or the corresponding principle of Aristotle that there is nothing that does not serve some purpose.

The view that metaphysics, or indeed philosophy generally, is uniquely self-critical is among the [myths](#) of modern thought. Philosophers rely on the results of other [disciplines](#) just as other people do; they do not pause to demonstrate the legitimacy of the principles of simple arithmetic before entering on calculations in the course of their work, nor do they refrain from employing the [reductio ad absurdum](#) type of refutation (*i.e.*, showing an absurdity to which a proposition leads when carried to its logical conclusion) until they have assured themselves that this is a valid way of confuting an opponent. Even in their own field they tend, like painters, to work within traditions set by great masters rather than to think everything out from scratch for themselves. That philosophy in practice is not the fully self-critical activity its exponents claim it to be is shown nowhere more clearly than in the reception that philosophers give to theories that are unfashionable; they more often subject them to conventional abuse than to patient critical examination. It is, nevertheless, from the [conviction](#) that philosophy, and especially metaphysical philosophy, operates without unjustified assumptions that current claims about

the superiority of this branch of thinking derive their force. This conviction connects with the views already mentioned, that metaphysics is the science of first principles and that the principles in question are ineluctable in the sense that they are operative in their own denial.