

Approaches to Metaphysics

Edited by
WILLIAM SWEET

APPROACHES TO METAPHYSICS

STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

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Edited by

WILLIAM SWEET

*St. Francis Xavier University,
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Contents

List of Contributors	vii
Introduction: Taking Metaphysics Seriously William Sweet	1
PART ONE: ISSUES IN CLASSICAL METAPHYSICS	
1. Does Being Have a Nature? (Or: Metaphysics as a Science of the Real) Lawrence Dewan, O.P.	23
2. Logic and Metaphysics in German Philosophy from Melanchthon to Hegel Riccardo Pozzo	61
3. Metaphysics, Mathematics, and Pre-Established Harmony Richard Feist	75
PART TWO: MODERN CHALLENGES TO THE SCOPE OF METAPHYSICS	
4. The Integration of History and Metaphysics Kenneth Schmitz	93
5. Suffering, Metaphysics, and Nietzsche's Path to the Holy Daniel Ahern	111

6. Can ‘Creation’ be a Metaphysical Concept? Peter Harris	127
7. Metaphysics West and East: Bosanquet and Sankara Gautam Satapathy	137
PART THREE: ON THE ROAD TO METAPHYSICS – FREEDOM, AGENCY, AND EXISTENCE	
8. Metaphysics and the Origins of Arendt’s Account of Evil and Human Freedom Charles LePage	159
9. Agents, Causes, and Explanations: The Idea of a Metaphysical System Leslie Armour	181
10. Speculative and Analytical Philosophy, Theories of Existence, and the Generalization of the Mathematical Function James Bradley	209
PART FOUR: METAPHYSICAL THEORIES IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT	
11. Jacques Maritain and the Metaphysics of Plato Fran O’Rourke	229
12. Metaphysics and Idealism W. J. Mander	249
13. Empiricism: Principles and Problems Fred Wilson	265
PART FIVE: THE POSSIBILITY OF METAPHYSICS	
14. Metaphysics as “ <i>de Insolubilibus</i> ” Martin M. Tweedale	303
15. Designing Metaphysics Elizabeth Trott	317
Index	327

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INTRODUCTION: TAKING METAPHYSICS SERIOUSLY

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To speak of ‘the nature of metaphysics’ would be considered by many philosophers today as begging at least two questions. First, it supposes that metaphysics is possible and, second, that it *has* a nature or a defining method.

This second charge is, perhaps, simply a reflection of the widely-held view that it is inappropriate to think of *anything* as having a nature. There may be metaphysical questions, one might say – questions that, for historical or genetic reasons, or based on ‘family resemblance,’ or out of mere convenience for categorization, people have chosen to call ‘metaphysical’ – but there is no ‘nature’ to metaphysics.

The first charge is more far reaching. For much of the modern period, many philosophers have argued that the subject matter of metaphysics lies beyond the capacities of human knowledge, that there is no way of establishing the truth of metaphysical claims, that propositions in metaphysics are not ‘cognitive’ (not being even in principle refutable) and, arguably, meaningless, and so on. Nor (some who make this charge continue) is there any good reason to believe that there is *a* reality about which a

systematic investigation can be undertaken, or to believe that questions posed and answers given, say, 2500 years ago, in another culture and context, can be adequately understood today, and therefore bear in any way upon the questions *we* raise.

The essays in this volume reflect some of the principal approaches philosophers have taken to metaphysics. While the immediate concerns vary, the essays also address, albethey in different ways, the preceding charges and related issues. Many of the authors focus on the work of leading figures in the history of metaphysics or on the ‘doctrines’ of some of the central ‘schools.’ In doing so, they not only raise and develop some of these criticisms, but clarify what metaphysics attempts to do, and what is involved in metaphysical inquiry. Nevertheless, to appreciate how far these authors can respond to challenges to metaphysics requires knowing something about the environment in which this topic has been, and is, discussed.

I

Is it possible to describe or define ‘metaphysics’ in a univocal and unambiguous way? Philosophers have written on (what we would generally call) metaphysics or on metaphysical topics for about as long as there has been ‘philosophy.’ Yet if we look at this history, we find a diversity of definitions of metaphysics and a diversity of metaphysical traditions and methods.

The term ‘metaphysics’ is one that is associated first with Aristotle, though metaphysics and the philosophical discussion of metaphysical questions are of course to be found in the pre-Socratics and Plato. In this classical sense, metaphysics deals with “being.” Aristotle describes metaphysics (what he himself calls ‘first philosophy’ (*prôtê philosophia*), or ‘theology’ (*theologikê*)) as a science of ‘being as being’ (*peri tou ontos ê on – Metaphysics VI, 1026 a, 31*), and as distinct from those sciences which study only a part of being. Metaphysics seeks the highest or most ultimate causes, principles that are eternal and unchanging. And Aristotle is followed in this description of metaphysics – that it “is the science of the first principles” (see *Metaphysics IV, 1003 a, 26*) – throughout the classical and mediaeval periods by figures like Boethius, St Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus, and Francisco Suarez.

Metaphysics, on this account, does not ignore concrete reality. What it means to study ‘being as such’ involves looking at being in its specific instances or determinations. Still, for Suarez, for example, metaphysics is defined as the science which “makes abstract palpable or material things [...]

and it contemplates on the one hand things that are divine and separated from matter, and on the other common reason of being, which can [both] exist without matter.”¹

With the modern era, however, the nature and role of metaphysics in philosophy seems to undergo a shift. For Descartes, metaphysics was “first philosophy” – by which he meant “all those first things in general which are to be discovered by philosophizing.”² But before we can philosophize, we must understand what it is to know, and how far knowledge can extend. Locke and Hume, in their distinctive ways, were insistent on this so that, by the time of Kant, metaphysics came to be regarded as “a completely isolated speculative science of reason”³ that “has as the proper object of its enquiries three ideas only: God, freedom, and immortality.”⁴ And on later idealist views, metaphysics loses the fundamental place that many classical philosophers ascribed to it. For Hegel, logic and metaphysics are identified; logic “coincides with metaphysics, the science of things grasped in *thought*”⁵ and “constitutes proper metaphysics or pure speculative philosophy.”⁶ For F.H. Bradley, metaphysics is “an attempt to know reality as against mere appearance, or [...] the effort to comprehend the universe, not simply piecemeal or by fragments, but somehow as a whole” – but Bradley adds: “I do not suppose [...] that satisfactory knowledge is possible.”⁷ By the end of the 19th century, as Baldwin’s *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* puts it, metaphysics is the “systematic interpretation of experience and the implication of all its implicates” that “must obviously coincide to a large extent with epistemology [...] or with logic in the Hegelian sense.”⁸

During the last 100 years, the understanding of metaphysics has become rather fragmented. For twentieth century authors who adopt a *realistic* metaphysics, like Jacques Maritain, metaphysics remains a part of speculative philosophy that deals with ‘being qua being’ or, more precisely, with three things: ‘criticism’ (or the metaphysics of truth dealing with intelligible being), ontology (that is, being as such), and natural theology (the existence and nature of God).⁹ But few philosophers – in the Anglo-American world at least – would explicitly agree with such a description. On the other side of *La Manche* – the ‘English Channel’ – Maritain’s contemporary, G.E. Moore, for example, defined the term ‘metaphysical’ “as having reference primarily to any object of knowledge which is not a part of Nature – does not exist in time, as an object of perception” – and which “has reference to a *supposed* ‘supersensible reality’.”¹⁰ (Emphasis added)

By the second half of the 20th century, many philosophers had abandoned metaphysics altogether – for reasons to be explained momentarily – and even those who remained committed to the study of metaphysics described it with varying degrees of comprehensiveness. P.F. Strawson – drawing on Kant –

pursued ‘descriptive metaphysics’ (as distinct from ‘constructive’ or ‘speculative’ metaphysics), which enquires into “our most general patterns of thought, and the nature of things themselves only indirectly, if at all.”¹¹ Recently, Peter Van Inwagen has defined it simply as that which “attempts to tell the ultimate truth about the world,”¹² and so it appears to include almost *all* of philosophy. John Paul II’s encyclical on truth, *Fides et ratio*, sees metaphysics as a fundamental philosophical enterprise that, in its search for truth, is “capable [...] of transcending empirical data in order to attain something absolute, ultimate and foundational.”¹³ Unlike philosophers of the first millennium and much of the second, at the beginning of the third millennium there is no obvious consensus on what metaphysics is.

The diversity of conceptions or definitions of metaphysics, evident in philosophy in Europe and the Americas, is easily matched when we consider philosophies and cultures in Asia and Africa. There we find lengthy and impressive traditions of speculation, such as the realist Nyaya, the atomist Vaisesika, and the idealist Advaita Vedanta in India,¹⁴ the mysticism of Taoism and (to an extent) of Chuang Tzu in China, the classical Arabic philosophy of Avicenna and Averroes, and neo-Confucian and Buddhist philosophy (not to forget movements like the 20th century, Kyoto School¹⁵) in Japan, and so on.

The list of metaphysical systems, traditions, and methods is obviously a very long one, and the range of metaphysical questions and concepts is similarly vast. The problem of change has been a fundamental question of metaphysics since the pre-Socratics and Plato, but it is far from the only metaphysical issue; the nature of ‘being’ and of existence; the nature of substance; causation, purpose, and design; freedom; time; the transcendent (God) and the transcendentals (the ‘good,’ ‘true,’ and ‘beautiful’) and their opposites (evil and suffering; falsehood; the ugly); particulars and universals; the nature of consciousness and of reality – all are themes that can be found in the work of those who profess to do metaphysics.

It is, then, no surprise – given that metaphysics seems to be properly understood in a wide range of ways – that in today’s philosophical environment many have concluded that it makes little sense to speak of ‘the’ ‘nature’ of metaphysics. Or, to put matters in a slightly different way, they hold that there is no common theme that describes what those who *claim* to be doing metaphysics *are* doing.

But perhaps the principal reason why metaphysics has been challenged by so many in modern and contemporary philosophy is not because there are different ways of describing or defining what it involves, but because there are doubts whether there can be such a subject matter of enquiry. Is metaphysics – at least as Plato, Aristotle, and St Thomas understand the term

– genuinely possible? This suspicion or rejection of metaphysics – at least, of metaphysics as a ‘first philosophy’ – seems to be the result of attacks on it on a number of fronts.

In most studies of the history of philosophy, one of the first phases of this attack is considered to be ‘the turn to the subject,’ and the corresponding emphasis on epistemology over metaphysics, typical of figures of the ‘modern’ period, such as Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant. Particularly since the time of Locke, metaphysics has been challenged as extending beyond the capacities of human reason, or as jargon-ridden – as sophistry and illusion – and therefore as something to be viewed with deep suspicion, if not discarded altogether.

Locke maintains, for example, that “in books of metaphysics” we find “an infinite number of propositions” that nevertheless tell us nothing “of the nature or reality of things existing without us” – so that when metaphysical propositions are not tautological, they are merely “trifling.”¹⁶ Again, according to Hume, metaphysics is “not properly a science” but arises “either from the fruitless efforts of human vanity, which would penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding, or from the craft of popular superstitions, which, being unable to defend themselves on fair ground, raise these intangling brambles to cover and protect their weakness.”¹⁷

This emphasis on epistemology and concern with the character and limits of human knowledge, led to the Kantian suspicion of *any* philosophy that has as its object something transcendent and, thereby, to the *rejection* of metaphysics. For Kant, because metaphysics proposes to deal with what is beyond experience, it is doomed to failure. In the first place, à la Hume, we simply cannot know anything that lies beyond the realm of possible sense experience and, besides, our knowledge is so structured and modified by the *a priori* conditions of the understanding that there is no good reason to believe that we have any basis to infer anything beyond our sense experience. The views proposed by Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant, and others, then, challenge traditional metaphysics to such a degree that they might better be seen, not as distinctive metaphysical theories, but as *marginalizing* metaphysics altogether.

This turn to epistemology also led to questions about the relation of logic and metaphysics, and whether there is any significant difference between them. For Hegel, since any study is an object of thought, questions about the whole (of the nature of) reality become questions about thought, and thus fall into what Hegel calls ‘logic.’ And as science became increasingly regarded as providing the appropriate method of knowledge, metaphysics seemed to disappear. Thus, for students of the Vienna school, or A.J. Ayer, or Karl Popper, metaphysics is subject to the charge of not being ‘scientific’ – or not

being knowledge of any kind – because it is not verifiable or falsifiable. And even though these criticisms later came to be seen as question begging or self-refuting, the damage to metaphysics had already been done.

Later phases of the challenge to metaphysics and to its character as ‘first philosophy’ did not deal so much with ‘knowing’ but with the character of what it is that metaphysics claimed to know. Thus, the primacy, or even possibility, of metaphysics came under criticism as a result of the claim that all human knowledge was socially constructed, or context-bound, or that there were no natures – no essence or ultimate reality – to be known. What a thing is, is something that cannot be separated from its historical context and place within the historical period in which it is found. (This ‘historicism’ many see to be a challenge posed particularly by post-Hegelian philosophers.) But it is not just the turn to ‘historicism’ that gave additional weight to the attack on metaphysics, it was also the insistence by some of the importance of language in relation to thought – and, specifically, the claim that thought requires language to be even possible. On this view, if something cannot be coherently expressed or articulated in language, it makes no sense to affirm or deny anything about it. Thus, in the 20th century, the ‘linguistic turn’ called into question any attempt to talk of metaphysical truth – particularly whether metaphysical propositions could be true.

These, of course, have not been the only attacks on the possibility of metaphysics; there have been other challenges as well, though largely taking the form of suspicion, rather than an outright critique.

There has been, in the first place, a gradual suspicion about what exactly metaphysics does or is supposed to do. Metaphysics has classically been understood to have an explanatory function – to explain or account for ‘what is.’ But for many today, a speculative philosophy or metaphysics is unnecessary because of the way in which we think about reality. These philosophers challenge the claim that ‘everything,’ or the totality of things, needs explanation or accounting for – that ‘everything’ needs an explanation over and above the explanation of all particular things. Pragmatism, for example, would allow that we can account for most phenomena, but rejects a *prima facie* requirement for an explanation of *all* that there is. Or again, existentialism is concerned with ‘the human predicament,’ but denies both that there are general ‘answers’ and that there are realities ‘outside’ the world that could ever provide such answers. And other views – various strains of naturalism and positivism, including Marxism – would also deny that there might be some supersensible reality in terms of which ‘ultimate explanations’ might be given. Besides, if existence isn’t a predicate or a property or a quality, there is simply no need for *explaining* existence. There is, in short, no

point in searching for a general explanation or an explanatory ground of what is, and thus no need for any field devoted to finding one.

Second, there is among some philosophers in the ‘western’ world an increasing mistrust of reason and rationality. The concern here is not merely one about the difficulty of determining the proper limits of reason, as in Locke, Hume, and Kant, but that we have no reason to claim that there is a cross-cultural standard of rationality or a single, universal model of reason; this concern is found particularly in ‘post-modern’ authors. Even if there could be a universal conception of reason, critics also charge that metaphysical categories are not neutral; they ignore important elements of human existence and reflect biases of culture and of gender. For example, some feminist scholars argue that the concepts of ‘mind’ and ‘body,’ and taking the former to be superior to the latter, skew conceptions of the ‘self’ and of the human in relation to the rest of reality. And metaphysics itself is alleged to depend on a ‘reason’ which professes to be neutral, but is not. ‘Reason’ as such has been, and is, a tool that, without warrant, marginalizes certain aspects of experience – and certain groups – and thus is hegemonic and oppressive. Metaphysicians (it is claimed) have tried to hide these assumptions and biases but, as scholars uncover them, they also expose a flaw in the very enterprise of traditional metaphysics. Metaphysics may yet be possible, but only if we reject – as Nietzsche argues – those metaphysical systems that hide behind their abstractions and are removed from life, and focus instead on issues arising out of the real problems of living beings.

Third, in some circles one finds a widespread suspicion of *any* systematic metaphysics. At one level, this suspicion is ‘political’; one of Karl Popper’s concerns about metaphysics from Plato to Hegel is that comprehensive metaphysical accounts have tended to bring with them comprehensive *political* systems that allegedly leave no or little room for human (political) freedom and autonomy.¹⁸ But at a more general level, some have asked whether there is in fact any ‘system’ that a systematic metaphysics can be about. If there is no stable core of philosophical problems, if reality is in large part, or wholly, ‘socially constructed,’ and if all knowledge and categories of knowing are ultimately ‘historical,’ a systematic metaphysics would be not just beside the point but impossible. Our energies, then, ought to be expended in discovering, not the conditions for what is, nor even the conditions of knowledge, but the *various* ways in which people might be said to know and (as Richard Rorty would say) how they can be influenced to be more just.

Finally, even if there can be a metaphysics, what method or methods might one use? Today, a multitude of options are on offer. It is not simply a choice of ‘analytical’ or ‘continental,’ but Thomistic, ‘phenomenological,’ rationalist, idealist, ‘process thought,’ empiricist, ‘speculative philosophical,’

‘feminist,’¹⁹ a variety of non-western approaches – and one might even add ‘sceptical.’ Of course, not every philosophical school has an explicit metaphysical method, for not every philosophy admits a place for metaphysics – though one might still say that all such schools make presuppositions concerning subject matter and method, and that these presuppositions *are* ‘metaphysical.’

In short, when it comes to what has traditionally gone under the rubric of ‘metaphysics,’ we find so much diversity in definition, in method, and particularly in object, that some have doubts that there can be any coherence or fruitfulness to the metaphysical enterprise whatsoever. The old saying that ‘metaphysics buries its undertakers’ may be true in more than one sense. So, in many quarters – even if not all – by the end of the 20th century, metaphysics had come to have a ‘bad odor.’ The turn to ‘post modern’ philosophy in the last two decades of that century has, for many, simply cemented a four-century long move away from systematic metaphysics.

Do all these considerations entail, then, that metaphysics is *not* possible and that there can be no nature of metaphysics? Perhaps not. After all, interest in metaphysics thrives in many places ‘out of the spotlight’; it is to be found in many parts of Europe and North America, in Indian and other Asian philosophies, and in general in those cultures and traditions where religion also continues to have a place. And the term ‘metaphysics’ itself is commonly used by a variety of new age religions to describe sets of quasi-spiritual practices and principles of varying degrees of superficiality and incoherence. Nevertheless, those professional philosophers in ‘the west’ who engage in metaphysics often do so mainly in the context of the history of philosophy, or in a rather piecemeal way – concentrating on problems such as personal identity, freedom of the will, realism and anti-realism, and so on, though without then bringing those conclusions into relation with other metaphysical issues. And while metaphysics has recently experienced something of a revival in Anglo-American philosophy – not just following the earlier work of Peter Strawson or D.M. Armstrong, but the more recent studies by Crispin Wright, Fred Dretske, John McDowell, Gilbert Harman, Stephen Stich, Timothy Williamson, Peter van Inwagen, Kevin Mulligan, Roy A. Sorensen, and others – it is still of a rather etiolated variety, and seems to be largely a generic description for the philosophy of mind.

It seems clear that metaphysics today does not have the position it had even a hundred years ago. What needs to be asked, however, is how conclusive the preceding challenges and suspicions are. As one follows the essays in this collection, one can see both the force and the limits of these criticisms.

II

Given the environment in which metaphysics finds itself today, it is easy to see why some would be wary about talking about metaphysics, its nature, and its method. As we have seen, the turn to epistemology in the modern era has certainly provided a challenge to classical metaphysics – for it reasonably raises the issue of whether any theory about what is (i.e., any metaphysical theory) *can* be given without already making a number of epistemological assumptions. And clearly, metaphysics as a discipline or study that attempts to describe what is, cannot be altogether separated from questions concerning the conditions under which any discipline, study, or science is possible. Yet despite the various criticisms and reservations outlined above, there are those who insist that a case can be made for doing not only metaphysics but systematic metaphysics.

The first papers in this collection provide some substantive reflections on the nature of classical metaphysics in relation to ‘being,’ logic, science, and history – and address some of the challenges of those who would ‘reduce’ metaphysics to logic, or who would ‘naturalize’ it to a species of mathematical science, or would historicize it.

Fr. Lawrence Dewan’s, “Does Being Have a Nature?,” addresses the questions of the nature of metaphysics and how metaphysics can be prior to epistemology. Dewan focuses on our knowledge of ‘being’ – both the being of things in their own proper nature and in the mind. He begins by presenting St Thomas Aquinas’s views on the analogy of being, as elaborated in his early *Commentary on the Sentences* of Peter Lombard, and particularly on the claim that being as ‘first intelligible’ is related to the intellect. Then, following John Capreolus (1380?–1444), Dewan argues that our knowledge of being is analogical, and that being as ‘first known’ and as ‘the first concept of the intellect’ makes all intellection (and therefore all other investigation) possible. Thus, the field of metaphysics has a *per se* unity, and any knowledge of being – even though abstract – depends on some kind of foundation in reality. Such a view of metaphysics not only rejects the epistemological challenges of Locke, Hume, and Kant, but would entail, *contra* Hegel, that metaphysics is broader than logic.

The shift from a classical metaphysics to a Hegelian identification of logic and metaphysics is striking. Riccardo Pozzo [“Logic and Metaphysics in German Philosophy from Melanchthon to Hegel”] provides some background to this move by situating the work of Hegel within German thought from the time of the Renaissance. Pozzo outlines the relation of logic and metaphysics, by starting with Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560) (who saw logic as the means by which there can be a conceptual comprehension of being, with the