

A SURVEY OF METAPHYSICS

By E.J. Lowe

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METAPHYSICS: CONTEMPORARY READINGS

Edited by Michael J. Loux

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Philosophy, that most misunderstood of intellectual pursuits, is often mocked; and no part of philosophy is as often mocked as metaphysics. The image of the ‘speculative metaphysician’ dreaming up abstract pictures of the world has been held up for ridicule by poets, playwrights, novelists, journalists as well as by other philosophers. The Logical Positivists in the first half of the 20th Century rejected all metaphysical speculations as ‘meaningless’ since they could not be verified by scientific experiment; in the later part of the century, Wittgenstein criticised systematic metaphysics as being a kind of intellectual disease resulting from our reading false pictures of the world into the grammar of our language. The common suspicion underlying many of these attacks is that ultimately, all metaphysics is a kind of nonsense, and that metaphysicians don’t really know what they are talking about. This suspicion is not new. Nicolas-Sébastien Chamfort commented in 1796, ‘I am tempted to say of metaphysicians what Scaliger used to say of the Basques: they are said to

understand one another, but I don't believe a word of it.' Some contemporary philosophers may agree.

Yet despite all this, metaphysics is inescapable in philosophy. Whenever we start speculating, however modestly, about how the world is in general, we confront metaphysical questions. Take causation. As soon as we start wondering about how the world hangs together, we are inevitably led to questions about cause and effect, about one thing making something else happen. In trying to find the most general truths about cause and effect, we might come to the conclusion, as many philosophers have done, that a cause must precede its effects in time. But this harmless conjecture is a metaphysical thesis which arguably has certain consequences about the nature of the universe – e.g. that it is not possible to travel backwards in time. The sceptics might say that we should refrain from such speculations, but they have not provided any especially convincing alternative to them. It seems that metaphysics is here to stay, like it or not.

In contemporary English-speaking philosophy, metaphysics is undergoing something of a revival. The 1960s and 70s were the decades of the philosophy of language, and the 1980s and 90s were the decades of the philosophy of mind. Whether the present decade is to be the decade of metaphysics remains to be seen, but one consequence of the relatively marginal position of metaphysics in the last few decades of the last century is the absence of a wide range of good introductory student texts in the subject, as opposed to the rich choice in the philosophies of mind and language. This situation is now beginning to change. E.J. Lowe, one of the UK's leading metaphysicians, has written a superb introduction to metaphysics. Lowe's approach is traditional, in that he takes metaphysics to be an inquiry into the 'fundamental structure of reality itself', rather than into our 'concepts'. So if an effect

cannot precede its cause, this is a truth about the world itself, rather than simply about the concept we express with the word 'cause'. This approach is refreshing and constructive, and allows Lowe to build up his metaphysical picture without too much need to worry who 'we' are in this context, or what exactly a concept is.

Lowe's book is the best introduction to metaphysics currently available; the competitors are either too difficult, too out of date or simply not as good. Over the course of twenty chapters, Lowe effortlessly introduces the main traditional themes of metaphysics: identity and change, substance, necessity, causation, actions and events, space and time, and universals. He writes clearly, is a brilliant expositor of the technical ideas of others, and does not refrain from arguing for his own position, which helps create a coherent overall picture. Tough going in places for a beginning student, Lowe's *Survey* would be an excellent book for a second or third year undergraduate course. It goes without saying that all other philosophers should read it too, to get a sense of the interest of contemporary metaphysics.

Although *Metaphysics: Contemporary Readings* is intended to accompany Michael Loux's own introductory text (*Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, Routledge 2001), it would also provide an excellent companion to Lowe's book. The anthology is divided into six sections – universals, particulars, possible worlds, time, persistence through time and realism – each prefaced by short and lucid introductions by Loux. The selections are predictable (which is not a bad thing in anthology of this nature) and with a few exceptions, classics in their fields. The range of Loux's themes, however, is somewhat narrower than Lowe's: Lowe has extensive discussions of causation, agency and events, subjects not covered by Loux; and where Loux's discussion of modality concentrates only on the currently fashionable topic of

possible worlds, Lowe ranges more widely over modal questions, discussing the varieties of possibility and essentialism.

Nonetheless, Loux's anthology would form an excellent basis for a higher-level undergraduate class in metaphysics, and sections from it could be used in lower-level classes (I would not myself teach beginning students about realism and anti-realism, for example). The book does, however, have some serious competition: in 1998-9 Blackwell brought out no fewer than four anthologies on metaphysics, each at least 600 pages long, and some of which have much overlapping material with Loux's collection. Unlike a couple of these Blackwell anthologies (e.g. *Metaphysics: the Big Questions* eds. P. van Inwagen and D. Zimmerman), but like Lowe's *Survey*, Loux's anthology lacks any attempt to make metaphysics 'sexy' by attempting to relate it to ethics or God or other issues students may have encountered elsewhere. This is not to disparage either Lowe or Loux; but it can sometimes be an uphill struggle to interest students in metaphysics without some connection with these (perhaps more initially appealing) kinds of topics.

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