

IS METAPHYSICS DIFFICULT?

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Abstract: The difficulty of philosophy reflects the mysterious nature of Reality. Here it is proposed that the inability of determinedly scholastic philosophers to solve philosophical problems is a clear indication that neither philosophy nor Reality is as complicated as they believe it to be but that its conceptual simplification cannot be achieved while they reject nondualism and endorse extreme and partial world-theories.

Of course metaphysics is difficult. Everybody who knows what the word means knows this. Yet I will propose here that a solution for metaphysical problems is not difficult to find given a rigorous simplification of the issues and a rough knowledge of the perennial philosophy. Time consuming perhaps, very much so for someone new to the issues, but not 'difficult' or 'hard' in the sense that these words are usually used in academic circles.

This proposal might seem ridiculous for various reasons. Yet to demonstrate the truth of it is not very difficult. Most importantly, it is not the proposal that it would be easy to make sense of the solution for metaphysics. As a solution for 'life, the universe and everything' we may find it no more useful than '42' or quantum theory. Rather, it is the more restricted proposal that the 'hard' problems of metaphysics, all those dilemmas and 'barriers to knowledge' that philosophers so often declare intractable and which might seem to prevent us from ever being able to work out the ultimate truth about ourselves and our universe, can be solved in logic and that this is not difficult to verify. If we can see that the solution would work, see that it would be a solution, but cannot understand it then this would be a personal and not a metaphysical problem. It is clearly not the case that it would be easy to understand the solution for metaphysics, whatever it is, otherwise most people would do so already, but finding a solution for a problem and understanding it are distinct tasks. The task for metaphysics, seen as straightforward and cold-hearted process of logical analysis, is to identify a solution that cannot be refuted in the dialectic and is thus 'reasonable' and that would work. It can do no more than this. The proposal here is that it does at least this much.

Our task becomes possible only if we can simplify the issues to the point where we can understand them and are thus able to make clear and rational decisions and place our trust in them, and also, in addition, if we can put on hold any preconceptions we might have about the nature of reality. We cannot hope to maintain our preconceptions and at the same time think rigorously and honestly about profound philosophical problems. If we attempt to do this then we will find ourselves complicating the issues in defence of our opinions and end up drowning in a sea of sophistry, unable to see the wood for the trees and claiming that metaphysics is useless. The cleverer we are the more likely this is to happen. If we cannot simplify the issues to the point that we can understand them, then from the study of metaphysics we are unlikely to discover any good reason to change our minds about anything we genuinely care about.

If we view metaphysics as a game of chess, a technical exercise in dialectic logic, and simplify it to its essentials then its problems can be made quite clear and comprehensible,

more or less mathematical or geometrical, and a successful and simple general theory becomes possible. This theory may seem to us to be something like quantum theory, successful but incomprehensible, but the success of a theory is not dependent on our being able to comprehend what it describes. It would depend on it being the best theory available or the only one that would work.

A simplification of metaphysics is possible because its problems are simple in form and holographic. They are isomorphic, structurally equivalent, and each one contains all the others. We can verify this quite easily by experiment. When we set out to solve any one of these problems we find that they are all so closely intertwined that in order to succeed with just this one we would need to solve all the others. Take any two questions concerning first principles and they can be shown to be inter-dependent, such that the solution for one would imply the solution for the other. This is as we would expect for questions about first principles, since by reduction there is not likely to be more than one.

This global equivalence has the wonderful consequence that if we can find an answer for one metaphysical problem then we can immediately generalise it to the rest. We do not have to worry about where to start. We can start with the problem that we know best or find the most interesting and if we can identify its solution then the whole of metaphysics is solved. It also has the useful consequence that we can test any interim hypothetical solution we may have against this requirement. If a solution to a metaphysical question cannot be generalised then it is not a correct solution.

Superficially there may appear to be many different questions we might ask about the true or fundamental nature of reality. They might concern personal behaviour, ethics and society, the meaning of life, cosmology, psychology, soteriology, theology, time travel, love, compassion, existence and many other things. Everyone will have their own favourites. Regardless, when we examine our favourite metaphysical problem we find that the reason why it seems intractable to us, if it does, is that it offers us a choice of exactly two solutions neither of which works. When we attempt to defend either of these two solutions we immediately find ourselves facing yet more questions that have exactly two solutions neither of which works. The situation may be summed up in this statement:

All positive metaphysical positions are logically indefensible.

The whole of metaphysics is contained in this statement. If we can see its full meaning and implication then we have simplified metaphysics to the point where it becomes quite easy to see a solution for it. Metaphysics is entirely concerned with either falsifying this statement or exploring its consequences. It represents the final result of metaphysics and is all we would need to know about it for a solution to its problems. Indeed, if someone were to ask 'What is the solution for metaphysics?' then it would not be unreasonable to give this statement in reply so clear is its implication for a solution.

What this statement says is that whenever we take sides on any metaphysical question we are bound to lose. All positive, selective, partial or extreme cosmological views fail in logic. They give rise to contradictions. Centuries of work by thousands of brilliant thinkers has established beyond doubt that the adoption of an extreme position would not be a satisfactory solution for any metaphysical problem. It is, after all, the absurdity of all such positions that causes metaphysics to become so complicated in the first place.

The scientific literature on the problem of consciousness serves as a good demonstration of how quickly the issues become complicated when we attempt to defend an extreme metaphysical position. Very quickly the debate becomes too complex for most people to follow. Logical Positivism, Dialethism, Mysterianism and other pessimistic views, which combine to create the widespread popularity of the view that the study of metaphysical problems is a waste of time, are all responses to the fact that extreme metaphysical views are unsatisfactory. They can be refuted. They do not work. This is well known. In modern 'scientific' consciousness studies this fact is largely ignored, however, and the result is there for anyone to see.

Let us avoid complicating the issues in this way. If all extreme, selective or positive metaphysical theories are logically absurd then they can be eliminated from our enquiry. There would be little point in knowing much about them. Let us forget them. An understanding of metaphysics would not depend on knowing much about all the many theories that do not work. This rejection of logically absurd theories represents a massive simplification of the issues. We need not worry about all the complex and difficult defensive arguments that are made for the theories we have eliminated. The analytical result captured in the brief statement above trumps all other arguments.

Now we need a theory that would explain why that statement is true and so give it some meaning and explanatory reach. There are just two theories that we need to consider. First, there is the theory that Reality is paradoxical. In this case a correct description of it would be logically absurd, and in this case a metaphysical theory may be logically absurd and true. This would render the statement above irrelevant to anything and end all hope of comprehending the world. Second, there is the theory that the description of the world given by all the world's major wisdom traditions is correct. We must choose between these two possibilities. There is no other theory left standing once we have eliminated all positive theories.

If we conclude that the world is paradoxical such that there are true contradictions then for us metaphysics is over. We would have explained away its problems and have no reason to do any more of it. Reason and logic are rendered impotent by our conclusion and we could have no further use for them. If, on the other hand, we conclude that the metaphysics that underpins the doctrine of the wisdom traditions may be true then there is still a sense in which metaphysics would be over. We would have solved all of its problems in principle and while there would remain the task of making sense of the solution this is not a metaphysical problem but more a matter of research.

So, the final choice we must make between these two theories may be seen as the end of metaphysics. Neither can be ruled out in metaphysics since neither is logically indefensible. Once we have made our choice then as a decision-making procedure we have taken logic as far as it can go. Even this choice must be made on other grounds than pure logic since if both possibilities cannot be refuted then we can only turn to empiricism to decide between them. One thing we can do to guide our decision would be to explore the ramifications of these two theories beyond metaphysics. These ramifications would extend in one direction to the natural sciences, where we would want to examine what they would imply for physics, mathematics and so forth, and in the other direction towards religion and mysticism, where we would want to investigate the more profound implications of abandoning all extreme metaphysical views, the consequences for theology, soteriology, psychology, existence and

so forth. But metaphysics would be all over bar the shouting. We have eliminated all but two metaphysical theories and just need to make sense of what is left.

Metaphysicians often get this far and no further. In order to take metaphysical analysis further, so that we are not just left in confusion by its result, it would be necessary to know that mysticism is the claim that all distinctions are emergent. That is to say, it is the claim that all extreme metaphysical theories are incorrect. This would be the reason why they are all logically indefensible. No other worldview makes this claim. So, metaphysics as a process of logical refutation presents us with a straight choice between believing that the universe is paradoxical or the idea that there is some truth in the doctrine of the Buddha and Lao Tsu. Theirs is the only systematic metaphysical theory that is not partial, extreme, positive or paradoxical.

Essential to this worldview would be the principle of nonduality. This is the idea that the ultimate phenomenon, the phenomenon without which we would not be here, the origin of our existence and all that to us seems to exist, would lie 'beyond the coincidence of contradictories', thus beyond all attempts to categorize it. Reality would be a 'unity', in no case an instance of this or that. This would be the full explanation for why theories that state it is otherwise fail in logic.

Simply put, therefore, metaphysics presents us with a choice between the idea that universe is paradoxical and the idea that it is a unity. If we conclude that it is a unity then we have solved all metaphysical problems. For every dilemma we face we can invoke the principle of nonduality and posit a third answer, one which is not a straight 'yes' or 'no' but which carefully avoids placing the ultimate into a category. This global compatibilism is perfectly in accord with ordinary reason and logic. The law of the excluded middle cannot be invoked where both of the answers to a question are false. If we ask, for instance, 'Is mind or matter fundamental?' and cannot make sense of the idea that it is neither then this is not because a third option would violate the rules of everyday dialectic reasoning.

In this way metaphysics can be simplified and solved. All of its problems except one now has an in principle solution. We could walk into a university staff-room full of eminent philosophers and quite easily defend our position. We would be defending the only metaphysical position that is defensible with the doubtful exception of the idea that reality is paradoxical. We have become philosophically invulnerable.

The question remains, however, are we actually right? Our solution is not much of one as yet. If we want to understand the world then this cannot be the end of our metaphysical investigations. It is rather as if we have received the answer '42' back from our calculations. At this point the 'principle of nonduality' might seem to us no more than a trick of logic, a sleight of hand used by the Buddha and Lao Tsu to avoid ever saying anything that can be refuted.

To comprehend how this solution might be developed into a general theory would require investigating its ramifications for many areas of knowledge. All the same, only a little knowledge of the perennial philosophy would be sufficient to confirm that it represents a rejection of all positive metaphysical positions. For this we only have to see that it is sometimes called the 'doctrine of the mean', and includes 'Middle Way' Buddhism, *advaita* (not-two) Vedanta and other traditions with highly suggestive names. If we can see that metaphysics does not endorse a positive position and at the same time see that mysticism,

gnosticism, call it what we will, is the rejection of all such positions then we have solved all metaphysical problems except one, which is that of understanding the solution.

Looked at in this way there is a sense in which metaphysics is difficult and a sense in which it is not. If we only want to know its solution in principle, in the way that most people 'know' $E=mc^2$, then this would not be difficult to achieve. There are only two possible solutions and it is a straight choice. The difficulty would lie only in the task of interpreting the solution, making sense of it, developing it into a useful and comprehensive theory. This could never be an easy or brief task but it is at least a relatively straightforward one now that we are examining only one or two theories and not the teeming multitude with which we started.

It would be necessary, so they say, to abandon metaphysics and take up some form of gnostic practice for a genuinely meaningful and reliable understanding of the idea that the universe is a unity but metaphysics does its job. It tells us where the truth lies according to reason and logic and in so doing provides a solid foundation for a systematic and logically defensible metaphysical theory. And all without ever getting particularly complicated.
