

Solving Metaphysics – Part I

Metaphysics in a Nutshell: A Lazy Philosopher's Guide

Peter G. Jones

Laziness will be a problem for us if it means that we leave undone the work we should be doing, but it can be a real blessing when it comes to not doing the work we needn't be doing. It motivates us to identify unnecessary work in order to avoid it.

For metaphysics we need not be workaholics. Laziness may work in our favour. In metaphysics we face much larger decisions than elsewhere in academia, decisions that are *final* and have an infinity of consequences for other disciplines. This is not the shop-floor or the middle-management offices. It is the office of the CEO with adjoining boardroom. This is where the big decisions are taken. The CEO cannot afford to be distracted by details and should probably be fired unless he or she spends a decent amount of time with both feet on the desk staring into space.

To deal with the big picture requires withdrawing into a higher level of abstraction and generality than can be achieved by someone rushing around and being busy all the time. It requires the ability to simplify, simplify and simplify again, for otherwise the complexity of the decisions facing even quite a small company may overwhelm the management.

There is an old joke about a meeting of the elected members of a local council, who spend ten minutes approving the new nuclear power plant and two hours on where to locate the new bike racks. Sometimes this joke seems to be relevant to the academic literature.

I once watched the CEO of a large local council take it from ninetieth in the national performance league table to third in five years. I never saw him doing anything other than swanning around in an expensive suit with a holiday tan and never saw a piece of paper on his desk. His job was to take very big and very good decisions, not to deliver some notional quantity of hard work.

Metaphysics is about standing back in contemplative mood and gaining a view of its problems sufficiently simple that we ourselves, you and me personally, can make

reliable, clear and above-all *final* decisions without having to sit through a board meeting lasting another two millennia. The refreshments alone could bankrupt the business.

Introduction

Try as we might to prove otherwise Existence, the existence of anything, the idea that anything exists, remains stubbornly inconsistent with human reason. If it is the case that anything exists then the world must contradict the logical laws by which our intellect takes philosophical decisions. Time, when it is reified, and necessary though it is for the continuing existence of anything, is clearly a daft idea and easily shown to be so. Space fares no better. Nothing seems to be fundamental. Almost every variation on Theism, the reification of God, forces believers to live with some degree of cognitive dissonance, often severe, and yet when it comes to the question of our ultimate origin none of Mind, Matter, Something or Nothing work even as well as God. Almost nothing about the world makes sense according to our usual view of it. By rights it should not be here and nor should we.

There is something about all this that does not add up. It is as if we are making some very basic but well-hidden error that turns philosophy and the world it describes into an incoherent jumble of impossible phenomena and incoherent concepts. This is clearly an error that can be made as easily by professionals as amateurs, for the latter receive little or no help from the former as to how to solve these metaphysical problems. Pessimism is the orthodox position in academia. It is not necessary for a professor of philosophy to understand his or her subject, so low is the expectation of employers and so sure are they that the subject is incomprehensible.

Yet the solution for metaphysics is not a secret and is widely known. The problem would be only that it is not widely known in western academia and receives little discussion. Here it is not often believed that there ever could be a solution for metaphysics and this one is usually dismissed out of hand even where it is noticed. It may be partly as a consequence of this that even today there is not much literature that explains this metaphysical solution in a straightforward way.

The proposal here is that a cold-hearted logical analysis of metaphysical problems and the practice of Zen meditation will produce the same result if we are successful. The former would produce a conjectural theory while the latter would produce

realisation and knowledge but it would be the realisation and knowledge that the theory is true, while the theory would explain how such knowledge is possible.

The proposal is not simply that the 'nondual' doctrine of Zen, esoteric religion, 'eastern' philosophy or 'mysticism' is true but, in addition, that it would be possible to *work this out* prior to taking up the practice and armed with very little understanding of what this doctrine actually teaches about the nature of Reality and the human condition other than what would be required to grasp its most general implication for metaphysics.

Let us be quite clear. The claim here is that almost the entire community of professional philosophers now at work in our western universities are making the same mistake, that it is a formal mistake, a lapse of rigour, a lack of attention to detail, an error that ineluctably renders metaphysics intractable and incomprehensible, just as they find it and just as they keep telling us it must always remain.

The solution for metaphysics on offer here is essentially simple and once roughly grasped it may seem to have been rather obvious all along. Prior to this it may not appear at all simple or even to be visible. To describe how it would work as a solution for all the many and various 'problems of philosophy' would be a long term project but if we take the most general view, as we must in metaphysics, then it can be sketched quite briefly.

We would need only to concede, or to suspend disbelief pending confirmation, that by reduction all metaphysical problems are the same problem and thus that their solution must be general and the same in each case. If we see metaphysics as a large collection of distinct problems each requiring a unique solution then we would be failing to see the wood for the trees and making it a thousand times more complicated than it will have to be if we are ever going to be able to understand it. This much is proved by history.

This is an attempt to simplify the issues and cover a lot of ground while maintaining rigour. It is not an introduction or a carefully constructed argument but a sketch of how an argument might be made and an indication of the world-theory that would be implied by its success. It outlines the principle metaphysical or logical argument that can be made for mysticism. 'Mysticism' here would mean nondualism, the claim that all division and distinction is unreal. 'Nondualism' would mean something that

cannot be fully explained but which would translate into discursive metaphysics as a *neutral metaphysical position*.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics may be defined as the study of absolutes, fundamentals, first principles or the ‘world as a whole’. It would be an area of knowledge where physics ceases to be useful except as a starting point and constraint on theories and where we have to rely on our reason to work out the rest of the story or seek other means than the intellect for progress.

This definition of metaphysics is deceptively simple and it is often skipped over in introductions to the topic. We are usually led like innocent lambs straight into the fiendish complexity of the details of this or that particular philosophical problem. Yet right here in this definition we have the *entire* problem of metaphysics.

What do we mean by ‘absolute’? The question can withstand almost any amount of thought. An absolute phenomenon would have to be unimaginably strange. It would have to be unique. There could not be two irreducible absolutes except by coincidence. It would have to be always whatever it is right now and in the same place it has always been. It must be both post and prior to space-time. It may have to transcend the manifest/un-manifest distinction and perhaps even the existence/non-existence distinction. How are we supposed to study such a phenomenon?

And, again, what do we mean by the phrase ‘world as a whole’? Obviously we mean ‘Everything’. Yet this word is fraught with well-known logical difficulties. In discursive philosophy ‘Everything’ is a concept. What kind of thinking could encompass a concept that is supposed to include itself? ‘Everything’ makes no sense in naïve set theory, for a ‘thing’ would be a set and the ‘set of all sets’ would inevitably have to leave something out, namely itself.

Speaking more psychologically, we cannot imagine the ‘world as a whole’ because we cannot include the phenomenon that is imagining it. If we make a list of all the things we can imagine there will be something that is not on it. So, if metaphysics is the study of the world as a whole it is unavoidably the study of whatever or whoever is studying it, and the motto for any successful reductionist study of Reality must be ‘Know Thyself’.

In this way, almost as soon as we begin to define metaphysics we run into a problems of self-reference that send us careering wildly off into the foundations of mathematics, psychology, mysticism and religion.

This is the problem at the heart of metaphysics, or one way of presenting it, and by solving it we would solve all of the subsidiary problems that arise from it. Set theorists will recognise it as Russell's Paradox but it takes on many subtle guises and crops up constantly, if we watch out for it, in psychology, metaphysics and religion as well in the foundations of mathematics. Essentially it is the problem of how to reduce the Many to One. To reduce the world to two phenomena is usually easy enough. Mind and Matter would be a common dualism, or in mathematics we might end up with just two sets, one of which could be the set of all sets except one. But something odd happens when we try to reduce the system further.

If we do not notice this problem when we start out in metaphysics then it will cause us trouble every day from then on until we do. We will be studying a wide variety of seemingly discrete problems and will almost certainly become too buried in the details to see the global move that would be required to solve them all at once, and may not even notice that all these various problems are instances of the same problem and are amenable to the same solution. It is at a much higher level of generality that metaphysics must be cured, for these many and various sub-problems are merely symptoms.

A Solution

In order to see how this central problem can be solved we would first need to be clear as to the extent of the problem and to have grasped something of its nature. Otherwise we may not recognise the solution when we see it and might not even be aware of the need for it. A solution could make no sense without a decent understanding of the problem. Once armed with this, however, we can make a start on narrowing down the search area for workable theoretical solutions until, hopefully, just one possibility remains, and then confirm that it would work.

The first task would require a lot of thought and a literature survey. Only someone who has been banging their head against the problems of metaphysics for a decent length of time is likely to be able to see the need for a solution as strange and subtle as any solution would have to be to work, and as strange and subtle as the one proposed here. The second task can be achieved by the usual metaphysical method, a

process of elimination by logical refutation. By successively reducing theories to absurdity we are eventually left with the most plausible. This is inference to the best explanation or 'abduction' as recommended by Sherlock Holmes and C. S. Peirce. Our logical decisions would be taken using Aristotle's rules for the dialectic and the game would be played by working conscientiously to refute every theory that can possibly be refuted.

A Strategy and a Shortcut

Metaphysical theories may be sorted into two categories. The first category would include all theories that are selective, partial, extreme or positive. Such theories come in pairs, one for a thesis and one for the opposite thesis. Examples would be Externalism-Internalism, Something-Nothing, Materialism-Idealism, Freewill-Determinism, One-Many, Manifest-Unmanifest. Such theories state that the world as a whole is in some case *this* rather than *that*, or has *this* rather than *that* property, or does or does not have properties.

The second category would contain all metaphysical theories that make no selective, partial, extreme or positive claims about the world as a whole but assert, rather, that the world as whole, the world *seen* as whole or from an ultimate perspective, is a unity.

These two categories are exhaustive. The solution for metaphysics must lie in one or the other. Otherwise the world is paradoxical and we would be wasting our time trying to make sense of it.

The meaning of 'unity' would be a topic beyond this short discussion and in a sense beyond all discussion, but we can note that in a metaphysical context this term should *not* imply monism, albeit that it would be rejection of all forms of dualism. The meaning is more obviously captured by the negative descriptive term *advaita* or 'not-two'. The crucial characteristic of this unity would be that it cannot be accurately described by any partial or positive theory. Any such description would deny its undifferentiated nature as a unity. It could only be described by a neutral theory using a system of description that replaces natural language with a language a contradictory complementarity, one that allows us to speak of it in terms of its opposite aspects without committing ourselves to one or the other, just as we use in quantum physics and for the same reason. This would account for the extensive use of paradox and contradiction in the language of Buddhism and for Lao Tsu's

aphorism stating that that words that are rigorously (and thus metaphysically) true will *seem* to be paradoxical.

We need not delve deeply into all these issues here. In metaphysics the immediate significance of this unity would lie in how it would work as a theoretical concept (or non-concept) once it is introduced as an axiom. What matters here, initially, is that an axiom of unity would imply the falsity of all the metaphysical theories we placed in our first category. Their falsity, once established, would thus imply the unity of reality at the ultimate level of *analytical* reduction. As we have already established over a great many centuries that none of these theories work in logic, having spent all of that time prevaricating between the two extreme views that form the horns of all these famous metaphysical dilemmas and antinomies, it might be said to be rather obvious that an axiom of unity represents a possible solution for all metaphysical problems.

There would be room for just one theory in our second category and it would be a *neutral metaphysical position*. There would be room for just one theory because where a theory departs from neutrality this will entail a positive or partial claim about the world as a whole which would disqualify it from this category.

A characteristic of a neutral theory that would be crucial to this discussion is that in logic it represents a solution for Russell's Paradox. This simple set-theoretic problem caused Russell enormous difficulties and it would be no coincidence that so also did metaphysics. It did not cause problems for his one-time colleague G. S. Brown and nor did metaphysics. This would also not be a coincidence. Brown's solution for Russell's Paradox, judged successful by Russell, has the philosophical implication that by reduction the world as a whole is a unity. This idea overcomes problems of self-reference in metaphysics just as in set theory. (It is also Kant's solution for psychology). But Russell did not want to extend this analytical result beyond mathematics into metaphysics and so ended his life believing that metaphysics is intractable, having along the way persuaded many people to make the same mistake.

Although this central problem of metaphysics is rarely addressed head-on, unimaginable amounts of work have been put into the sub-problems that arise from it. The result is a large collection of complex and finely-nuanced partial theories that all belong in our first category. Fortunately, we do not need to untangle this rats-nest of theories. The most important property that all these theories share is that none of

them work. Their failure is well known and it is what leads Russell and so many other philosophers to dismiss metaphysics as useless.

What is less well known is that the theory in the second category does work. Many philosophers appear to be unaware that it even exists and yet it is the only theory that Kant does not dismiss for being one half of an undecidable pair of unworkable theories, the only theory that the Buddhist sage and philosopher the Noble Nagarjuna does not reduce to absurdity in his iconoclastic second-century survey of metaphysical views known as *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, and it is widely considered to be the philosophical foundation of mysticism or the 'perennial' philosophy. As a world-view that extends beyond discursive metaphysics it is commonly called *nondualism*.

The solution for metaphysics, therefore, would be to abandon all the theories that do not work and keep the one that does. Simple enough. Or, it would be were it not that the theory that works is mysticism. This is not an uncontroversial result. If Nagarjuna's logical proof is sound then the solution for metaphysics is a theory for which the teachings of the Buddha would have to be true. In this case the solution for metaphysics would vindicate the mystical tradition and its doctrine of unity as it appears in all the world's principle religions and from the dawn of recorded human history. This will be a psychological hurdle for many travelers down this road and it is bound to make things less than easy for some. Yet we must note that it is not a complication, only a hurdle, and we set the height of it for ourselves. We can simply ignore it if we wish. This implication of metaphysics certainly does concern many people, however, and it is a concern that clearly works against progress in philosophy. It need not concern us here. We are looking for a solution and this one seems to be the only possibility. Either it works or it fails and we must decide which it is before the end of the meeting.

Francis Bradley, who largely reproduces Nagarjuna's logical result in his 1898 essay *Appearance and Reality*, characterises metaphysics as an 'antidote to dogmatic superstition'. If the analysis above is correct then it does its job perfectly well. Conversely, in the absence of such an analysis metaphysics appears to be more or less useless.

Onwards and Upwards

By standing back from metaphysics and identifying a completely general solution we have saved ourselves a vast amount of work. Now only one theory need be studied in depth. There would be little purpose in learning all about the theories that fail. For one of many such examples, (and tricky definitions notwithstanding), Freewill fails and Determinism fails. This ends the debate. What we need is a different explanation of these things and we would now know where to look for it. A neutral position would not endorse either extreme view but would reconcile them as aspects of a deeper truth. If the world is a unity then this principle can be generalised as a solution for all metaphysical antinomies.

We have now broken the back of the problem of metaphysics at the level of principles. For a complete solution that might convince a sceptic we would have to go on to explore the implications of a neutral metaphysical position in detail, watching how all those ancient metaphysical dilemmas are untangled one by one when we adopt this unique and subtle cosmological theory. There would be a danger of ending up a Buddhist, or at least a sympathiser, but this sort of danger is what makes metaphysics so interesting. We are not playing for matches.

From a certain perspective, then, the solution offered here is quite obvious. Many people arrive at it independently. At the same time, and this is an important feature, it is well enough disguised to account for why it is so often overlooked. Prior to a close investigation a neutral metaphysical position may easily appear to be a mere logical trick, an unreasonable or even irrational idea. Yet if all positive metaphysical positions fail then where else could the solution lie but in abandoning them? Is it really an unreasonable idea, or have we not quite understood it yet?

Despite its prominence and pedigree, the idea of the unity of all being seems almost absent from our university philosophy. It has been absent, Heidegger suggests, since around the time of Plato. The result is stagnation and despondency. Perhaps, then, the central problem for metaphysics would be that it can be a hard pill to swallow. Not everybody wants an antidote against dogmas and false views. Regardless, the solution offered here works in logic, is consistent with experience and is not going to go away. It represents a sufficient explanation for why metaphysics can seem so difficult for it would become utterly impossible when we ignore this solution, yet render it relatively easy when we do not. Ignoring this solution would be a defining feature of any characteristically 'western' approach to metaphysical thinking, and a review of the literature since Plato will provide plentiful evidence of the futility of such an approach.

In Summary

In summary, metaphysics does not endorse a positive or partial theory but does endorse a neutral one, a theory for which our world would have to be just as Nagarjuna and the Buddha describe it. This is the situation and if we accept it then we have solved metaphysics. It would be impossible to prove that this is not the correct solution, as we would have to do in order to prove that any other theory is true, so it is job done. The solution for every metaphysical dilemma would be to abandon the two extreme views from which it is formed and to try to understand the alternative.

We would treat these pairs of theories as category-errors and *not* as exhausting the possibilities, and so this solution causes no problems for classical logic. Indeed, it would be precisely the habit of scholastic philosophers of seeing these pairs of theories as true contradictory pairs for the dialectic, such that there could be no other option, that is the mistake and lapse of rigour referred to at the start of this essay, for it renders metaphysics intractable. Once this mistake is made nondualism appears to be paradoxical and so must be ruled out, rendering the world incomprehensible.

This explains in outline one workable solution for all major problems of philosophy and the reason why these problems do not arise for the philosophical scheme of Middle Way Buddhism, Philosophical Taoism, Sufism, *advaita* Vedanta, the Christianity of *A Course in Miracles* and all other instances of the nondual doctrine.

It is difficult to see why it should be a lot longer before all serious philosophers agree that an axiom of unity is the only solution for metaphysics that works. The problem of consciousness alone seems enough to show that a new idea is required in western thought, and what other relevant new idea is available and likely to work? At least this one is well developed as a theory, has an extensive literature and has been tested beyond all hope of falsification. For now, however, we must keep busy defending metaphysics from the charge that it is useless, even though such a charge could only be laid by someone who has not noticed or refuses to consider the solution offered here.

This essay has a sequel further discussing the philosophical mistake referred to here. It is called *Do We Regularly Make a Mistake in Metaphysics?* If it is not

available in the same place as this one it is here

<https://theworldknot.wordpress.com/do-we-regularly-make-a-mistake-in-metaphysics/>