

WHAT IS METAPHYSICS?



AN AUTONOMOUS DISCIPLINE?

FEATURES

- ❖ ‘There are, I believe, five main features that serve to distinguish traditional metaphysics from other forms of enquiry. These are:
 - ❖ the aprioricity of its methods;
 - ❖ the generality of its subject-matter;
 - ❖ the transparency or ‘non-opacity’ of its concepts;
 - ❖ its eidicity or concern with the nature of things;
 - ❖ and its role as a foundation for what there is.’ —Fine, 8

THREE IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS

- ❖ The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction
- ❖ The Necessary/Contingent Distinction
- ❖ The *A Priori/A Posteriori* Distinction

ANALYTIC/SYNTHETIC

- ❖ The Character of this Distinction
 - ❖ This is a syntactic-semantic distinction.
- ❖ The Distinction
 - ❖ A sentence is analytically true/false *iff* it is true/false purely by virtue of its logical form or by virtue of the meanings of its words and independently of matters of fact.
 - ❖ A sentence is synthetic *iff* it is not analytic.

NECESSARY/CONTINGENT

❖ The Character of this Distinction

- ❖ This is a metaphysical distinction.

❖ The Distinction

- ❖ A proposition is necessarily true/false *iff* it is true/false and could not possibly have been false/true (or as Leibniz suggests, a proposition is necessary *iff* it is true in all possible worlds).
- ❖ A proposition is contingent *iff* it is true in some possible worlds and false in others.
 - ❖ A sentence is necessarily true/false *iff* given its meaning it could not possibly have been false/true; that is, it is true/false in every possible world where it means what it does in this world.
 - ❖ A sentence is contingent *iff* it is true in some worlds and not others.

THE A PRIORI/A POSTERIORI DISTINCTION

- ❖ The Character of this Distinction
 - ❖ This is an epistemological distinction.
- ❖ The Distinction
 - ❖ One has *a priori* knowledge that p *iff* one knows p by reason or conceptual resources alone (that is, the extra-mental world makes no contribution to the justification of p).
 - ❖ *A posteriori* knowledge is knowledge that is not *a priori*.
 - ❖ N.b. this is a point about justification, not genesis.

A CO-EXTENSIVITY HYPOTHESIS

- ❖ Although drawn from different domains, these distinctions are co-extensive:
 - ❖ p is known *a priori* iff p is necessary iff p is analytic
 - ❖ p is known *a posteriori* iff p is contingent iff p is synthetic

GENERALITY, PREAMBLE

- ❖ The word ‘metaphysics’ began to have something of its broader, contemporary meaning only in the seventeenth century.
- ❖ Then metaphysicians started to expand their traditional interest in the nature of being (*to on*) by sliding into allied issues about the natures of various *kinds of beings* (including minds and bodies, and the relations between them, and thus, inexorably, into the nature of causation).
- ❖ This circumstance quite reasonably led the German philosopher Wolff to rechristen traditional metaphysics as *ontology*—the study of being—which thereafter came to be regarded as but one branch of metaphysics.

FOOTNOTE TO THIS USAGE

- ❖ In fact, Wolff did not use the word '*ontologia*' first.
- ❖ It was used by Rudolf Golcenius in his *Lexicon Philosophicum* (1613) and also Jacob Lorhard in *Ogdoas Scholastica* (1606).
- ❖ Still, it seems to have moved into broader currency only after the publication of Wolff's *Philosophia prima sive ontologia* (1730).
 - ❖ It did not take long, in any case, for the terms 'metaphysics' and 'ontology' to become mixed up, beginning a trend bedeviling undergraduates even today. Already in 1776, we find Adam Smith writing: 'Subtleties and sophisms. . . composed the whole of this cobweb science of Ontology, which was likewise sometimes called Metaphysics' (*Wealth of Nations* II. V. i. 354).

TWO NOTIONS OF FOUNDATIONS

- ❖ Some things may be *more basic* than others
 - ❖ Others stand in a dependency relation (or in various dependency relations) upon them; the foundational entities ground the non-basic, or non-foundational.
 - ❖ These foundations items are often held to be *more real* than other things.
 - ❖ This is primarily an observation about *status*.
- ❖ Or, one may think that some things ground the *natures* of others
 - ❖ ‘Metaphysics, on this alternative conception, serves as a foundation, not for reality as such, but for the nature of reality. It provides us with the most basic account, not of things – of how they are – but of the nature of things – of what they are.’ —Fine, 10

EIDICTIC AS TO CONTENT

- ❖ A statement may be eidictic—or, form-involving—in two ways:
 - ❖ As to status: Water is H₂O
 - ❖ As nature-specifying: Water is by nature H₂O.
- ❖ Fine's idea: non-eidictic truths will provide the foundation for eidictic truths as to content.

SO, CONSIDER

1. Red and green are two distinct determinates of the determinable colour.
 2. Distinct determinates of a determinable are incompatible.
 3. If distinct determinates of a determinable are incompatible, then they are by their very natures incompatible.
- ❖ ‘The first two are plausibly taken to be a priori and non-eidictic (as to content), while the third is plausibly taken to be an eidictic principle of metaphysics.’ —Fine, 12

EIDICTICITY REFINED

- ❖ ‘What I would like to suggest is that the truths of an eidictic field should be taken to be those that are distinctively true in virtue of its overall subject-matter, i.e. they are those that are true in virtue of its overall subject-matter but not true in virtue of its non-distinctive subject-matter, that part of its overall subject-matter that is not distinctive to the field. This then has the desired results. The Law of Identity ($\forall x(x = x)$), for example, is not a truth of mathematics since it is true in virtue of its non-distinctive subject-matter and that $2 + 2 = 4$ is a truth of mathematics since it is true in virtue of its broadly mathematical subject-matter but not in virtue of purely logical subject-matter.’ —Fine, 20
- ❖ ‘Put somewhat grandiosely, we might say that ‘ $\square FS$ ’ for suitable F is the general form of a metaphysical claim and that the task of metaphysics will have been completed once we have a complete inventory of the F (the general traits of reality) and of the truths of the form $\square FS$ (to the effect that S is true in virtue of the nature of the F).’
—Fine, 21