

**DIRECTORATE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL**

**MASTER OF ARTS-PHILOSOPHY  
SEMESTER -III**

**WESTERN METAPHYSICS**

**CORE-302**

**BLOCK-1**

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## UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL

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## **FOREWORD**

The Self Learning Material (SLM) is written with the aim of providing simple and organized study content to all the learners. The SLMs are prepared on the framework of being mutually cohesive, internally consistent and structured as per the university's syllabi. It is a humble attempt to give glimpses of the various approaches and dimensions to the topic of study and to kindle the learner's interest to the subject

We have tried to put together information from various sources into this book that has been written in an engaging style with interesting and relevant examples. It introduces you to the insights of subject concepts and theories and presents them in a way that is easy to understand and comprehend.

We always believe in continuous improvement and would periodically update the content in the very interest of the learners. It may be added that despite enormous efforts and coordination, there is every possibility for some omission or inadequacy in few areas or topics, which would definitely be rectified in future.

We hope you enjoy learning from this book and the experience truly enrich your learning and help you to advance in your career and future endeavours.

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# WESTERN METAPHYSICS

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# **BLOCK 1 : WESTERN METAPHYSICS**

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## **Introduction to the Block**

Unit 1 deals with Metaphysics: possibility, scope and concerns. As a beginner for the course on “Metaphysics,” you may start considering it as the study of the ultimate causes and of the first and most universal of all principles (Being).

Unit 2 deals with Appearance and reality. The fact of illusion and error is in various ways forced early upon the mind; and the ideas by which we try to understand the universe, may be considered as attempts to set right our failure

Unit 3 deals with the Brief History of Western Metaphysics and the main objective of this unit is to acquire an in-depth knowledge of the history of western metaphysics.

Unit 4 deals with the Concept of Being, becoming: essence and existence and in philosophy, essence is the property or set of properties that make an entity or substance what it fundamentally is, and which it has by necessity, and without which it loses its identity.

Unit 5 deals with the concept of Substance: Aristotle’s account. The first major work in the history of philosophy to bear the title “Metaphysics” was the treatise by Aristotle that we have come to know by that name.

Unit 6 deals with the understanding of Rationalism and Empiricism and the dispute between rationalism and empiricism takes place within epistemology, the branch of philosophy devoted to studying the nature, sources and limits of knowledge.

Unit 7 deals with the Process view of Morality. The major objective of this unit is to introduce the learners to the concept of moral experience in general and guide them to gain an insight in to the philosophical analysis of the main components of moral experience, namely moral consciousness, moral judgment, moral dilemmas, moral principles and moral sentiments.

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# **UNIT 1: METAPHYSICS: POSSIBILITY, SCOPE AND CONCERNS**

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## **STRUCTURE**

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Etymology of Metaphysics
- 1.3 Definition of Metaphysics
- 1.4 Scope of Metaphysics: Material and Formal Object
- 1.5 Let us sum up
- 1.6 Key Words
- 1.7 Questions for Review
- 1.8 Suggested readings and references
- 1.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## **1.0 OBJECTIVES**

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As a beginner for the course on “Metaphysics,” you may start considering it as the study of the ultimate causes and of the first and most universal of all principles (Being). Ultimate causes extend their influence to all the effects within a given sphere. Metaphysics considers the absolutely ultimate cause of all beings. It strives to identify that cause and know more about its nature and activity. In this Unit you will have to pay attention to:

- Etymology of Metaphysics
- Definition of Metaphysics
- Scope of Metaphysics

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## **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

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The universe has always spurred humans to wonder. They have laboured continuously, seeking an explanation for the universe – an explanation

that can be considered ultimate and universal or all-encompassing. In this effort, various schools of thought arose throughout the course of history, each offering one's own explanation. Some identified the most radical basis of reality with one particular element intrinsic to it, such as matter, spirit, thought or motion; this would imply that everything in the universe is just an offshoot or derivative of that element. On the other hand, some maintained the existence of a transcendent Principle which made the universe without being part of it. Some thinkers proposed the existence of one origin of the universe, while others held that the universe came to be from two or more sources. These views are not purely speculative; on the contrary, they exert a deep influence on human psyche. It does make a difference for a human to believe that everything – including oneself – originated from inert matter and will go back to it, or to believe that one was created by God, who brought one's being out of nothing. To regard human beings as beings subject to the whims of blind destiny, or absolute masters of their own existence, or as creatures capable of freely knowing and loving a personal God – all these are doctrinal options that mark out completely the divergent paths for human life. Initially, the study formed only one undifferentiated body of knowledge called philosophy, wisdom or science. Soon after, however, studies of different aspects of reality (e.g., mathematics, medicine and grammar) gave rise to special or particular sciences, which became distinct from philosophy proper which dealt with the more fundamental questions about reality. In turn, as the body of philosophical knowledge grew, there appeared branches of philosophy dealing with specific objects of study, such as nature, human and morals. One discovers among these branches, a core of philosophical knowledge that influences all other branches, for it seeks the ultimate structure of the universe, which necessarily leads to the study of its first and radical cause. This science is called metaphysics.

Metaphysics, a discipline with a long history, has been conceived in different ways. A widely held view is that it is the most general and most fundamental of all the disciplines. Its aim is to identify the nature and structure of all that there is. Central to this project is the interpretation of

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the relation between Being and beings, between one and many. The problem of Being and being (one and many) can be said to be the most fundamental metaphysical problem under which anything that exists falls. On this problem of metaphysics, what the metaphysician is supposed to do is to identify the relevant kinds, to specify the characteristics or features peculiar to each, and to indicate the ways those very general kinds are related to each other. It turns out, however, that metaphysicians have disagreed about this problem. For example, Aristotle and the medievals give us two different accounts of it. Sometimes, they characterize it as the attempt to identify the first causes, in particular, God or the Unmoved Mover, and at times, as the very general science of being qua being. They believed, however, that these two characterizations identify the same discipline.

The modern and contemporary rationalists, by contrast, expanded the scope of metaphysics. They have taken it to be concerned not merely with the existence and nature of God, but also with mind and body, the immortality of the soul, and free-will. The empiricists and Kant were critical of both Aristotelian and rationalist conceptions of metaphysics, arguing that they seek to transcend the limits of human knowledge. Hence, it is not easy to say what metaphysics is. If one looks to works in metaphysics, one finds quite different perspectives of the discipline. Sometimes these perspectives seek to be descriptive, to provide us with an account of what philosophers who have been called metaphysicians do. Sometimes, they are normative. They represent attempts to identify what philosophers ought to be doing when they do metaphysics. But descriptive or normative, these perspectives give such different accounts of the subject matter and methodology appropriate to metaphysics that the neutral observer is likely to think that they must be characterizing different disciplines. Disagreement about the nature of metaphysics is tied to its long history. Philosophers have been doing or trying to do something they have called metaphysics for more than 2,500 years. The results of their efforts have been accounts with a wide variety of subject matters and approaches. These various subject matters and approaches are implicit in this course on “Metaphysics.”



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## 1.2 ETYMOLOGY OF METAPHYSICS

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In the West, Aristotle can be called the beginner of the science of being as being or metaphysics. But the name 'metaphysics' attributed to this science of 'being as being' is something accidental. It was Andronicus of Rhodes, around 60 AD, while editing the manuscripts of Aristotle, labeled the books which happened to be placed after Aristotle's works on 'physics' as 'meta ta physika,' meaning 'after physics'. Just as the Upanishads, being placed at the end of the Vedas, came to be called as Vedanta, metaphysics derives its name from being placed after physics in the writings of Aristotle. But in fact, metaphysics denotes the science of what is beyond (meta) nature (physika) of an object above the mere material. Many of the early Greek philosophical writings bore the title 'Concerning Nature' (the Greek term for nature was physika). These words usually dealt with what we would now consider physical science, but there were also speculations about the meaning and nature of the universe - that is, with questions which arise after the physical problems have been resolved, or which are concerned with what lies after or beyond the physical world of sensory experience. Thus, metaphysics denotes the science of what is beyond (meta) the nature (physika) of an object. In the medieval and modern philosophy, metaphysics has been taken to mean the study of things transcending nature, i.e., existing separately from nature and having more intrinsic reality and value than the things of nature, giving meta a philosophical meaning it did not have in classical Greek. Since Immanuel Kant, metaphysics has often meant a priori speculation on question that cannot be answered by scientific observation and experiment. The term has also been popularly associated with the spiritual or religious. In modern philosophical usage, metaphysics refers generally to the field of philosophy, dealing with questions about the kinds of things there are and their modes of being.

Various names have been given to Metaphysics which, in fact, emphasizes the different aspects and attributes of one and the same science. Aristotle's name for metaphysics was 'First Philosophy' as it is dealing with the first causes and principles of reality. Metaphysics enjoyed a primacy of excellence or dignity over all the other sciences.

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The name 'First Philosophy' clearly explains the central place that metaphysics occupies in the whole of philosophy. It also distinguishes metaphysics from all other branches of philosophy which Aristotle called as 'secondary philosophies'. Aristotle also called it the divine science because it treats of the most divine beings, that is, substances which are separated from matter and above them, Pure Act or Prime Mover. In the seventeenth century, Christian Wolff called it "Ontology", theory of being, a name deriving from the Greek *on* = being, and *logos* = theory or doctrine. This is evidently the most simple and the most exact term. Many of the modern philosophers prefer the name 'ontology' instead of 'metaphysics.' Yet, some have rejected it giving as a reason that the term ontology has been used sometimes in an idealistic sense to mean the science of the idea of being, or an a priori knowledge without relation to experience. But the term metaphysics can cause just as much equivocation as the term ontology itself.

The word "metaphysics" derives from the Greek words *μετά* (*metá*, "beyond", "upon" or "after") and *φυσικά* (*physiká*, "physics").<sup>[6]</sup> It was first used as the title for several of Aristotle's works, because they were usually anthologized after the works on physics in complete editions. The prefix *meta-* ("after") indicates that these works come "after" the chapters on physics. However, Aristotle himself did not call the subject of these books "Metaphysics": he referred to it as "first philosophy." The editor of Aristotle's works, Andronicus of Rhodes, is thought to have placed the books on first philosophy right after another work, *Physics*, and called them *τὰ μετὰ τὰ φυσικὰ βιβλία* (*ta meta ta physika biblia*) or "the books that come after the [books on] physics". This was misread by Latin scholiasts, who thought it meant "the science of what is beyond the physical".

However, once the name was given, the commentators sought to find intrinsic reasons for its appropriateness. For instance, it was understood to mean "the science of the world beyond nature" (*physis* in Greek), that is, the science of the immaterial. Again, it was understood to refer to the chronological or pedagogical order among our philosophical studies, so

that the "metaphysical sciences" would mean "those that we study after having mastered the sciences that deal with the physical world" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio in librum Boethii De hebdomadibus*, V, 1).

Here's a thought I've had, which is another attempt to give richer meaning than a poor translation to the term metaphysics. (I completely understand the term doesn't need to or isn't supposed to mean anything in particular, but I liked my thought process and thought I'd share it.)

It's based on something I heard Diana Brickell (Hsieh) say once, that the term metaphysics is completely wrong. Metaphysics is supposed to be primary, and Aristotle is said to have called it "first philosophy".

Even though it is the "first philosophy", epistemologically, I realized metaphysics does come after physics. One doesn't notice the law of cause and effect, one notices a lots of cause and effect patterns, and then one induces a principle. So, despite the mistranslation, and the fact that hierarchically, metaphysics comes before physics---chronologically/developmentally/epistemologically, metaphysics does come after physics.

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### **1.3 DEFINITION OF METAPHYSICS**

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Metaphysics may be considered as the study of the ultimate causes and of the first and most universal principles of Being. Ultimate causes are differentiated from proximate causes which produce, in an immediate manner, some specific effects. Ultimate causes or the supreme causes, in contrast, extend their influence, to all the effects within a given sphere. Metaphysics considers the absolutely ultimate cause of the universe. It strives to identify that cause and know more about its nature and its activity. Metaphysics studies the first and most universal principles of all things, Being. Aside from causes that exert their influence on their effects from outside, there exists internal elements in the effect themselves that constitute them and affect their manner of being and acting. These are usually called principles. (Thus atoms are certain principles of molecules which determine the nature and properties of the

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latter; in living beings, cells act like the principles of the organism). Metaphysics seeks the first and most universal principles, that is, those principles which radically constitute all things.

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that examines the fundamental nature of reality, including the relationship between mind and matter, between substance and attribute, and between potentiality and actuality. The word "metaphysics" comes from two Greek words that, together, literally mean "after or behind or among [the study of] the natural". It has been suggested that the term might have been coined by a first century CE editor who assembled various small selections of Aristotle's works into the treatise we now know by the name Metaphysics (ta meta ta phusika, 'after the Physics', another of Aristotle's works).

Metaphysics studies questions related to what it is for something to exist and what types of existence there are.

Metaphysical study is conducted using deduction from that which is known a priori. Like foundational mathematics (which is sometimes considered a special case of metaphysics applied to the existence of number), it tries to give a coherent account of the structure of the world, capable of explaining our everyday and scientific perception of the world, and being free from contradictions. In mathematics, there are many different ways to define numbers; similarly in metaphysics there are many different ways to define objects, properties, concepts, and other entities which are claimed to make up the world. While metaphysics may, as a special case, study the entities postulated by fundamental science such as atoms and superstrings, its core topic is the set of categories such as object, property and causality which those scientific theories assume. For example: claiming that "electrons have charge" is a scientific theory; while exploring what it means for electrons to be (or at least, to be perceived as) "objects", charge to be a "property", and for both to exist in a topological entity called "space" is the task of metaphysics.

There are two broad stances about what is "the world" studied by metaphysics. The strong, classical view assumes that the objects studied by metaphysics exist independently of any observer, so that the subject is the most fundamental of all sciences. The weak, modern view assumes that the objects studied by metaphysics exist inside the mind of an observer, so the subject becomes a form of introspection and conceptual analysis. Some philosophers, notably Kant, discuss both of these "worlds" and what can be inferred about each one. Some philosophers, such as the logical positivists, and many scientists, reject the strong view of metaphysics as meaningless and unverifiable. Others reply that this criticism also applies to any type of knowledge, including hard science, which claims to describe anything other than the contents of human perception, and thus that the world of perception is the objective world in some sense. Metaphysics itself usually assumes that some stance has been taken on these questions and that it may proceed independently of the choice—the question of which stance to take belongs instead to another branch of philosophy, epistemology.

Thus philosophers consider some particular aspect of reality as the most basic, and as such the origin of everything else (for example, change or becoming, quantity, the essence etc.). Whenever someone considers something as the first intrinsic principle of everything, one is already talking at the metaphysical level. At this level, metaphysics includes everything real within its field of study because it seeks the ultimate cause and fundamental principles of things; in contrast, particular sciences study only a limited aspect of the world. These sciences advance in their own field thanks to a body of permanent knowledge which serves as their basis, and which is always assumed or taken for granted in every scientific research. For example, the notions of plant life, of life in general, the material body, quantity and the like. Scientists ordinarily do not conduct further studies regarding these, but if they ask, "what is life?", "What is quantity?", "What is to know, to see and to feel?", then they are already posing philosophical questions. These are actual questions which are more radical and basic than the questions generally posed by the scientists, and which are in turn presupposed by them:

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“What does it mean to be?”, “What is causality?”, “What is the meaning of the universe?”, “What is truth?”, “What is good?” etc. In all these questions, one is looking for the core and ground of all knowledge. Thus, Bernard Lonergan (1904 – 1984) would describe metaphysics as ‘the core and ground of human knowledge as it underlies, penetrates, transforms and unifies all other departments of knowledge.’ First, it underlies all other departments: It underlies all other departments since its principles are the detached and disinterested drive of the pure desire to know. The unfolding of the pure desire to know takes place in the empirical, intellectual and rational consciousness of the self-affirming subject.

All questions, all insights, all formulations, all reflections and all judgments proceed from the unfolding of that drive. Hence, metaphysics underlies logic, mathematics and all other sciences. Second, it penetrates all other departments: For other departments are constituted of the same principles as that of metaphysics. They are particular departments related to particular viewpoints. Yet, all departments spring from a common source and seek a common compatibility and coherence. Hence, they are penetrated by metaphysics. Third, it transforms all other departments: Metaphysics originates from the ‘experience of something’. It is free from the realization of particular viewpoints. It distinguishes positions from counter-positions in the whole of knowledge. It is a transforming principle that urges positions to fuller development. By reversing counter-positions, it liberates discoveries from the shackles in which they were formulated. Fourth, it unifies all other departments: For other departments respond to particular ranges of questions; whereas metaphysics deals with the original, total question, and in this way, it moves to the total answer transforming and putting together all other answers. Hence, we may define metaphysics as the core and ground of all knowledge, which is the science of being as being.

Metaphysics, the philosophical study whose object is to determine the real nature of things—to determine the meaning, structure, and principles of whatever is insofar as it is. Although this study is popularly conceived

as referring to anything excessively subtle and highly theoretical and although it has been subjected to many criticisms, it is presented by metaphysicians as the most fundamental and most comprehensive of inquiries, inasmuch as it is concerned with reality as a whole.

### **Origin of the term**

Etymologically the term metaphysics is unenlightening. It means “what comes after physics”; it was the phrase used by early students of Aristotle to refer to the contents of Aristotle’s treatise on what he himself called “first philosophy,” and was used as the title of this treatise by Andronicus of Rhodes, one of the first of Aristotle’s editors. Aristotle had distinguished two tasks for the philosopher: first, to investigate the nature and properties of what exists in the natural, or sensible, world, and second, to explore the characteristics of “Being as such” and to inquire into the character of “the substance that is free from movement,” or the most real of all things, the intelligible reality on which everything in the world of nature was thought to be causally dependent. The first constituted “second philosophy” and was carried out primarily in the Aristotelian treatise now known as the *Physica*; the second, which Aristotle had also referred to as “theology” (because God was the unmoved mover in his system), is roughly the subject matter of his *Metaphysica*. Modern readers of Aristotle are inclined to take both the *Physica* and the *Metaphysica* as philosophical treatises; the distinction their titles suggest between an empirical and a conceptual inquiry has little foundation. Aristotle was not indifferent to factual material either in natural or in metaphysical philosophy, but equally he was not concerned in either case to frame theories for empirical testing. It seems clear, nevertheless, that if the two works had to be distinguished, the *Physica* would have to be described as the more empirical, just because it deals with things that are objects of the senses, what Aristotle himself called “sensible substance”; the subject matter of the *Metaphysica*, “that which is eternal, free of movement, and separately existent,” is on any account more remote. It is also evident that the connection marked in the original titles is a genuine one: the inquiries about nature carried out in the

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Physica lead on naturally to the more fundamental inquiries about Being as such that are taken up in the *Metaphysica* and indeed go along with the latter to make up a single philosophical discipline.

The background to Aristotle's divisions is to be found in the thought of Plato, with whom Aristotle had many disagreements but whose basic ideas provided a framework within which much of his own thinking was conducted. Plato, following the early Greek philosopher Parmenides, who is known as the father of metaphysics, had sought to distinguish opinion, or belief, from knowledge and to assign distinct objects to each. Opinion, for Plato, was a form of apprehension that was shifting and unclear, similar to seeing things in a dream or only through their shadows; its objects were correspondingly unstable. Knowledge, by contrast, was wholly lucid; it carried its own guarantee against error, and the objects with which it was concerned were eternally what they were, and so were exempt from change and the deceptive power to appear to be what they were not. Plato called the objects of opinion phenomena, or appearances; he referred to the objects of knowledge as noumena (objects of the intelligence) or quite simply as realities. Much of the burden of his philosophical message was to call men's attentions to these contrasts and to impress them with the necessity to turn away from concern with mere phenomena to the investigation of true reality. The education of the Platonic philosopher consisted precisely in effecting this transition: he was taught to recognize the contradictions involved in appearances and to fix his gaze on the realities that lay behind them, the realities that Plato himself called Forms, or Ideas. Philosophy for Plato was thus a call to recognize the existence and overwhelming importance of a set of higher realities that ordinary men—even those, like the Sophists of the time, who professed to be enlightened—entirely ignored. That there were such realities, or at least that there was a serious case for thinking that there were, was a fundamental tenet in the discipline that later became known as metaphysics. Conversely, much of the subsequent controversy about the very possibility of metaphysics has turned on the acceptability of this tenet and on whether, if it is rejected, some



alternative foundation can be discovered on which the metaphysician can stand.

**Check Your Progress 1**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) What is the etymological meaning of metaphysics?

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2) How does Bernard Lonergan explain metaphysics?

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**1.4 SCOPE OF METAPHYSICS:  
MATERIAL AND FORMAL OBJECT**

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Generally, matter, in philosophy, indicates the indeterminate but determinable element, and ‘form’ the determining element. These relative meaning of ‘material’ and ‘formal’ are also found in the theoretical sciences especially when there is questions of the ‘material object’ and the ‘formal object’ of a science. Material Object is the definite realm or definite subject matter which a science deals with. For instance, man, inanimate matter, the stars, the earth, language, religion, law etc. Formal Object is that special aspect of the material object which is under consideration or study. A definite material object that is taken as

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the general matter to be studied will have too many knowable aspects to be grasped fully in a single intellectual consideration. To arrive at a wellfounded total view, one will have to approach it in quasi-partial studies, i.e., through formal and analytic abstraction, the various aspects of the object. The material object so considered in a definite aspect, is thus called formal object. The material object of metaphysics includes all things which fall under the notion of being, `such as actual or possible, abstract or concrete, material or immaterial, finite or infinite. The formal object of metaphysics is the study of ‘being as being,’ ens in quantum ens. That is to say, metaphysics does not restrict itself to any particular being or part of that being, but rather treats of what is common to all beings, namely, Being which is the ground of beings since all beings are in Being. Being is not a particular thing though it embraces everything in it. That which is not particular is still something or in some way. Hence, Being is that which is in some way or something.

All of us know that everyone has always and everywhere an experience of ‘something.’ This experience of ‘something’ is an inescapable experience. One may escape from a particular experience, but one cannot escape from experiencing something. The most fundamental and radical question one can raise is this: ‘Is there anything at all?’ The answer can either be a negation or an affirmation. If it is a negation it should be so: ‘There is nothing.’ Such an answer is self-contradictory as the answer affirms a negation which is again ‘something.’ Hence, an absolute negation is impossible. For, paradoxically every absolute negation presupposes an absolute affirmation upon which the negation rests. This affirmative experience of ‘something’ is not ‘that which is not’ but ‘that which is’ or ‘Being’ which is in some way or something. Of course, our knowledge of Being is an act of intuition, because of the indubitable, inseparable, and immediate self-presence of being as being to my knowing in a pre-predicative certainty which precedes the formation of all explicit concepts and judgments.

But this intuition is so imperfect that it does not yet say anything explicit about identity or participation, unity or plurality, etc. Because of this

imperfection of our intuition we are forced to express the knowledge of Being by means of a judgment. Now that the problem facing us is no longer that of being as being, but the problem of one and many, i.e., we will have to investigate more accurately the nature of the predicate which is common to all and ask ourselves how a predicate that does not express any plurality, finiteness, imperfection, or indetermination can be predicated of distinct, manifold, finite, imperfect, and determinable subjects. This investigation will have to show how the most universal concept expresses everything at the same time, but simultaneously falls short because of its inadequacy. Taken in an absolute sense, Being pertains to everything: the necessary, the real, and even the possible, the object known and the knowing subject, the concept and what is conceived, what is perceived and what is purely proposed in imagination or thought, and even the purely apparent.

Therefore, Being or 'something' is the absolutely allembicing notion. It is a general notion. By 'general' is meant one which refers to many. Thus it means here that 'Being' is predicated of each of many beings distributively as multiplied in these many. Being is the absolutely general notion, because it is predicated not merely of a group of beings but absolutely of all. If Being is the absolute general notion, it cannot be defined; for a definition places the concept defined under a more general thought content or genus (higher class) and indicates how it differs from other concepts falling under the same genus by means of a specific difference. But the notion of Being does not fall under a higher, more general concept and therefore it is not a species. It is the first known in which everything else that is known, thought or proposed is already present and presupposed. We can describe the notion of Being only if we recognize a certain structure in it. Like all our concepts, it is not perfectly simple, but shows a certain dichotomy of bearer and form. Being is that which is, that which has 'Being', that which has a reference to 'Being', and through which 'Being' is. If Being is considered as a predicate, it is a participle and emphasizes the participation in 'Being'. If it is used as a subject, it is a noun and stresses that which participates in 'Being', the bearer or the subject of 'Being'. Now a question arises: Is Being known

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by abstraction? Abstraction is the operation by which the mind leaves aside, abstracts from certain aspects of a being. When the intellect abstracts it out of the whole complex of a being, it does so as it discovers that other beings also exhibit this same feature. The more the content of a thought is abstract and leaves aside more particular contents, the more does its extension become general, universal and predicable of a large number. The opposite of abstraction is contraction which is a process by which the mind adds again to the central characteristic of a being the aspects which were left behind through abstraction.

Since this central feature was universal, contraction will limit a concept from the more universal to the more particular. Accordingly, an increase in comprehension is accompanied by a decrease in extension. The abstraction in question is generalizing abstraction, called 'total' abstraction. It is a logical process in which one and the same concrete whole, e.g., John, is considered under an increasingly more general aspect, for instance, as human, sentient being, living being, corporeal being. It means that the being from which the concept is abstracted is not expressed as to one of its parts only but as a whole: the totality is expressed but not totally. For this reason the concept obtained through total abstraction can be predicated of more particular concepts and of the individual being, e.g., John is a human, or a human is a sentient being. If we suppose that the concept of a being is the most abstract in the sense of total abstraction, it would retain only that in which the many beings agree, but leave aside that in which they differ. The differences would be expressed in differentiating concepts that stand independently alongside the notion of Being. They would have to be added to it through contraction as positive enrichments of its content if one wanted to arrive at knowledge of the various beings. Thus there would be a plurality of concepts. Nevertheless, these many thought contents would have to constitute a certain unity, no matter how imperfect it is. Hence the notion of Being and the differentiating concepts would have to show a certain similarity with one another. But then this similarity itself through a process of abstraction could be isolated in a higher and more general concept and so on to infinity, without ever allowing us to reach the

absolutely supreme and first notion. However, because of the unity of thinking as well as that of the thinkable, there has to be a supreme and all-embracing concept. Hence the most general concept cannot be obtained through abstraction which leaves aside the differences. Therefore, this concept is of another nature than abstract concepts. It has to include also the differentiating concepts, not merely potentially as in concepts that are obtained through total abstraction, but actually. Thus it is not possible to perform a perfect conceptual separation of that in which beings are similar and that in which they differ. Otherwise, since they are similar in this that they all are, their dissimilarity would have to lie in something that is beyond Being i.e., in non-Being. But non-Being cannot be the foundation of a difference; for to differ is to be different, to be in a different way. Therefore, the various beings differ in Being itself.

Accordingly, the differentiating concepts, which express the distinct modes of Being of the various beings, such as subsistent, accidental, material, or spiritual, do not contain absolutely anything. But in that case they are not additions to the notion of Being. Consequently, they must lie within the content itself of Being as its immanent precisions. Thus it follows that the notion of Being is not abstract in the proper sense of the term 'total abstraction.' The notion of 'Being' extends to all beings not only insofar as they are similar but also insofar as they are dissimilar, and contains them in all aspects. For this reason we call the notion of Being 'transcendental'. It is not only the absolutely general concept, transcending all other concepts in extension, but it is at the same time absolutely all-embracing inasmuch as it somehow includes all other possible thought contents. Being transcends every genus and all differences: it contains in an eminent way not only the highest abstract concepts or general, but also the differentiating concepts and therefore also the concepts of species. Everything in every concept is permeated with the notion of Being. The term 'transcendental' is opposed to "categorical." A concept is 'categorical' insofar as it falls under one of the categories or predicaments which are the fundamental concepts. These are positively distinct and thus opposed to one another and do not agree in a higher general concept obtained through proper abstraction. It

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is to these categories that univocal concepts of genus and species are reduced. 'Transcendental' belongs first of all to 'Being'. For this reason we give the name 'transcendental properties of being' to the properties which flow from being as being. Such characteristics, flowing from the identity of Being with itself, are the following: unity, truth, goodness, and beauty. In a somewhat broader sense one may consider as transcendental properties those which pertain not to all beings but to beings having a higher mode of Being, inasmuch as they do not include any imperfection in themselves. 'Transcendental' in the Kantian sense is opposed to 'empirical' and applies to knowledge insofar as this knowledge is not concerned with objects but with the subjective a priori possibility of knowing objects. 'Transcendental' should also be distinguished from 'transcendent,' i.e., what transcends a given order of being and is independent of it. With reference to the cognitive object, 'transcendent' means that which is above the cognitive immanence of the object. With respect to the world of experience, it indicates what lies beyond the world of experience. And with regard to the finite, it applies to what transcends everything finite. Accordingly, the difference between the transcendental notion of Being and abstract general concepts lie in this: 'Being' belongs to a being not only because of its similarity but also because of its dissimilarity with the other beings; whereas the unity of the abstract-general concept results from its abstraction.

True, the notion of Being actually contains anything whatsoever that in any way has a reference to 'Being' and includes even the differences through which the various beings are in their own way. But as a concept or intermediary representation of our thinking, it is unable to give us adequate knowledge of the universal interconnection uniting 'everything that is.' This imperfectness consists in the fact that, although this idea contains the different modes of Being actually, it contains them only implicitly and confusedly. Despite their being contained in this notion, they are not yet known explicitly and distinctly. For this reason sometimes the term 'improper' abstraction is used with respect to the notion of Being, for it does not leave anything behind but it does not yet say everything explicitly. Thus there is need for other concepts.

However, these concepts are not wholly and entirely different, but only more explicit renderings of what is already contained in the notion of Being. Accordingly, the development of thought consists in an immanent explicitation of the notion of Being, so that in an increasingly more adequate way everything which through Being is possible and all its realizations are brought to explicit knowledge in more determined concepts. It is only in this way that the full richness of the notion of 'Being' reveals itself. The transition from the confused notion to the explicit grasp of 'that which is' depends on experience and the insight contained in it. It is only through experience that we are placed in the presence of the various modes of Being, which we cannot immediately deduce from the general notion of Being itself. If Being is the absolutely general notion, it belongs to everything. But if at the same time it is transcendental and thus contains not merely potentially but actually the differentiating concepts, how can it be predicated of the various beings and aspects of Being in the same undifferentiated sense? In other words, the notion of Being is predicated of many in a sense that is neither absolutely the same nor entirely different. It has a unity of meaning because its sense reveals not an absolute but a relative similarity in the judgments we make about different beings commonly called 'analogy'.

### **Characterizations of metaphysics**

Before considering any such question, however, it is necessary to examine, without particular historical references, some ways in which actual metaphysicians have attempted to characterize their enterprise, noticing in each case the problems they have in drawing a clear line between their aims and those of the practitioners of the exact and empirical sciences. Four views will be briefly considered; they present metaphysics as: (1) an inquiry into what exists, or what really exists; (2) the science of reality, as opposed to appearance; (3) the study of the world as a whole; (4) a theory of first principles. Reflection on what is said under the different heads will quickly establish that they are not sharply separate from one another, and, indeed, individual metaphysical

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writers sometimes invoke more than one of these phrases when asked to say what metaphysics is—as, for example, the British Idealist F.H. Bradley does in the opening pages of his work *Appearance and Reality* (1893).

### An inquiry into what exists

A common set of claims on behalf of metaphysics is that it is an inquiry into what exists; its business is to subject common opinion on this matter to critical scrutiny and in so doing to determine what is truly real.

It can be asserted with some confidence that common opinion is certainly an unreliable guide about what exists, if indeed it can be induced to pronounce on this matter at all. Are dream objects real, in the way in which palpable realities such as chairs and trees are? Are numbers real, or should they be described as no more than abstractions? Is the height of a man a reality in the same sense in which he is a reality, or is it just an aspect of something more concrete, a mere quality that has derivative rather than substantial being and could not exist except as attributed to something else? It is easy enough to confuse the common man with questions like these and to show that any answers he gives to them tend to be ill thought-out. It is equally difficult, however, for the metaphysician to come up with more satisfactory answers of his own. Many metaphysicians have relied, in this connection, on the internally related notions of substance, quality, and relation; they have argued that only what is substantial truly exists, although every substance has qualities and stands in relation to other substances. Thus, this tree is tall and deciduous and is precisely 50 yards north of that fence. Difficulties begin, however, as soon as examples like these are taken seriously. Assume for the moment that an individual tree—what might be called a concrete existent—qualifies for the title of substance; it is just the sort of thing that has qualities and stands in relations. Unless there were substances in this sense, no qualities could be real: the tallness of the tree would not exist unless the tree existed. The question can now be raised what the tree would be if it were deprived of all its qualities and stood in



no relations. The notion of a substance in this type of metaphysics is that of a thing that exists by itself, apart from any attributes it may happen to possess; the difficulty with this notion is to know how to apply it. Any concrete thing one selects to exemplify the notion of substance turns out in practice to answer a certain description; this means in effect that it cannot be spoken of apart from its attributes. It thus emerges that substances are no more primary beings than are qualities and relations; without the former one could not have the latter, but equally without the latter one could not have the former.

There are other difficulties about substance that cannot be explored here—e.g., whether a fence is a substance or simply wood and metal shaped in a certain way. Enough has already been said, however, to indicate the problems involved in defining the tasks of metaphysics along these lines. There is, nevertheless, an alternative way of understanding the notion of substance: not as that which is the ultimate subject of predicates but as what persists through change. The question “What is ultimately real?” is, thus, a question about the ultimate stuff of which the universe is made up. Although this second conception of substance is both clearer and more readily applicable than its predecessor, the difficulty about it from the metaphysician’s point of view is that it sets him in direct rivalry with the scientist. When the early Greek philosopher Thales inquired as to what is ultimately real and came up with the surprising news that all is water, he might be taken as advancing a scientific rather than a philosophical hypothesis. Although it is true that later writers, such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, a German Rationalist philosopher and mathematician, were fully aware of the force of scientific claims in this area and, nevertheless, rejected them as metaphysically unacceptable, the fact remains that the nonphilosopher finds it difficult to understand the basis on which a Leibniz rests his case. When Leibniz said that it is monads (i.e., elementary, unextended, indivisible, spiritual substances that enter into composites) that are the true atoms of nature and not, for example, material particles, the objection can be raised as to what right he has to advance this opinion. Has he done any scientific work to justify him in setting scientific results

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aside with such confidence? And if he has not, why should he be taken seriously at all?

The science of ultimate reality

To answer these questions, another description of metaphysics has been proposed: that it is the science that seeks to define what is ultimately real as opposed to what is merely apparent.

The contrast between appearance and reality, however, is by no means peculiar to metaphysics. In everyday life people distinguish between the real size of the Sun and its apparent size, or again between the real colour of an object (when seen in standard conditions) and its apparent colour (nonstandard conditions). A cloud appears to consist of some white, fleecy substance, although in reality it is a concentration of drops of water. In general, men are often (though not invariably) inclined to allow that the scientist knows the real constitution of things as opposed to the surface aspects with which ordinary men are familiar. It will not suffice to define metaphysics as knowledge of reality as opposed to appearance; scientists, too, claim to know reality as opposed to appearance, and there is a general tendency to concede their claim.

It seems that there are at least three components in the metaphysical conception of reality. One characteristic, which has already been illustrated by Plato, is that reality is genuine as opposed to deceptive. The ultimate realities that the metaphysician seeks to know are precisely things as they are—simple and not variegated, exempt from change and therefore stable objects of knowledge. Plato's own assumption of this position perhaps reflects certain confusions about the knowability of things that change; one should not, however, on that ground exclude this aspect of the concept of reality from metaphysical thought in general. Ultimate reality, whatever else it is, is genuine as opposed to sham. Second, reality is original in contrast to derivative, self-dependent rather than dependent on the existence of something else. When Aristotle sought to inquire into the most real of all things, or when medieval

philosophers attempted to establish the characteristics of what they called the *ens realissimum* (“the most real being”), or the original and perfect being, they were looking for something that, in contrast to the everyday things of this world, was truly self-contained and could accordingly be looked upon as self-caused. Likewise, the 17th-century Rationalists defined substance as that which can be explained through itself alone. Writers like René Descartes and Benedict de Spinoza were convinced that it was the task of the metaphysician to seek for and characterize substance understood in this sense; the more mundane substances with which physical scientists were concerned were, in their opinion, only marginally relevant in this inquiry. Third, and perhaps most important, reality for the metaphysician is intelligible as opposed to opaque. Appearances are not only deceptive and derivative, they also make no sense when taken at their own level. To arrive at what is ultimately real is to produce an account of the facts that does them full justice. The assumption is, of course, that one cannot explain things satisfactorily if one remains within the world of common sense, or even if one advances from that world to embrace the concepts of science. One or the other of these levels of explanation may suffice to produce a sort of local sense that is enough for practical purposes or that forms an adequate basis on which to make predictions.

Practical reliability of this kind, however, is very different from theoretical satisfaction; the task of the metaphysician is to challenge all assumptions and finally arrive at an account of the nature of things that is fully coherent and fully thought-out.

It should be obvious that, to establish his right to pronounce on what is ultimately real in the sense analyzed, the metaphysician has a tremendous amount to do. He must begin by giving colour to his claim that everyday ways of thinking will not suffice for a full and coherent description of what falls within experience, thus arguing that appearances are unreal—although not therefore nonexistent—because they are unstable and unintelligible. This involves a challenge to the final acceptability of such well-worn ideas as time and space, thing and attribute, change and

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process—a challenge that metaphysicians have not hesitated to make, even though it has been treated with skepticism both by ordinary men and by some of their fellow philosophers (e.g., G.E. Moore, a 20th-century British thinker who has greatly influenced modern Analytic philosophy). Second, granted that there are contradictions or incoherences in the thought of common sense, the metaphysician must go on to maintain that they cannot be resolved by deserting common sense for science. He will not deny that the concepts of science are in many respects different from those of everyday thought; to take one aspect only, they are altogether more precise and sharply defined. They permit the scientist to introduce into his descriptions a theoretical content that is lacking at the everyday level and in so doing to unify and render intelligible aspects of the world that seem opaque when considered singly. The metaphysician will argue, however, that this desirable result is purchased at a certain price: by ignoring certain appearances altogether. The scientist, in this way of thinking, does not offer a truer description of the phenomena of which ordinary thought could make no sense but merely gives a connected description of a selected set of phenomena. The world of the scientist, restricted as it is to what can be dealt with in quantitative terms, is a poor thing in comparison with the rich if untidy world of everyday life.

Alternatively, the metaphysician must try to show that scientific concepts are like the concepts of common sense in being ultimately incoherent. The premises or presuppositions that the scientist accepts contain unclarity that cannot be resolved, although they are not so serious as to prevent his achieving results that are practically dependable. Many ingenious arguments on these lines have been produced by philosophers, by no means all of whom could be said to be incapable of a true understanding of the theories they were criticizing. (Leibniz, for example, was a physicist of distinction as well as a mathematician of genius; G.W.F. Hegel, a 19th-century German Idealist, had an unusual knowledge of contemporary scientific work; and Alfred North Whitehead, a pioneer of 20th-century metaphysics in the Anglo-Saxon world, was a professor of applied mathematics, and his system developed

from physics and contained a wealth of biological ideas.) The fact remains, nevertheless, that few if any practicing scientists have been seriously troubled by such arguments.

Even if the metaphysician were thus able to make good the negative side of his case, he would still face the formidable difficulty of establishing that there is something answering to his conception of what is ultimately real and of identifying it. The notion of an original being, totally self-contained and totally self-intelligible, may not itself be coherent, as the 18th-century British philosopher David Hume and others have argued; alternatively, there may be special difficulties in saying to what it applies. The fact that different metaphysicians have given widely different accounts of what is ultimately real is certainly suspicious. Some have wanted to say that there is a plurality of ultimately real things, others that there is only one; some have argued that what is truly real must be utterly transcendent of the things of this world and occupy a supersensible realm accessible only to the pure intellect, while others have thought of ultimate reality as immanent in experience (the Hegelian Absolute, for example, is not a special sort of existent, but the world as a whole understood in a certain way). That metaphysical inquiry should issue in definitive doctrine, as so many of those who engaged in it said that it would, is in these circumstances altogether too much to hope for.

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## 1.5 LET US SUM UP

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Metaphysics has constantly aspired to say what there is in the world and to determine the real nature of things. It has been preoccupied with the questions of existence and reality. Metaphysics has been commonly presented as the most fundamental and also the most comprehensive of inquiries. It claims to be fundamental because questions about what there are or about the ultimate nature of things underlies all particular inquiries. The questions about existence and reality, along with those about potential and actual being and about causation cut across the boundaries of particular sciences and arise in connection with every sort of subject matter. Thus Metaphysics is comprehensive just because of its extreme generality. Again, whereas sciences like physics and

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mathematics are departmental studies each of which deals with a part or particular aspect of reality, metaphysics, by contrast, is concerned with the world as a whole. Often inquiries in the individual sciences are carried out under assumptions which it is the business of Metaphysics to make explicit and either to justify or to correct. Metaphysics, by contrast, proceeds without assumptions and is thus fully self-critical. Metaphysical propositions derive their unique certainty from their being the products of reason when that faculty is put to work in the fullest and freest way. The result will be that metaphysics is not only the most fundamental of studies, but it is also one which relies for its results on the efforts of reason alone.

### Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) Explain the formal object of metaphysics

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2) What do you understand by “Being”?

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## 1.6 KEY WORDS

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**Material Object:** Material object is the general subject matter of a science which is the common subject-matter of several sciences.

**Formal Object:** Formal object is the specific aspect of the subject matter of a science which belongs to the science under consideration only.

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## 1.7 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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- 1) What is the etymological meaning of metaphysics?
- 2) How does Bernard Lonergan explain metaphysics?
- 3) Explain the formal object of metaphysics
- 4) What do you understand by “Being”?

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## 1.8 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## 1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to Check your Progress 1

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1. It was Andronicus of Rhodes, around 60 AD, while editing the manuscripts of Aristotle, labeled the books which happened to be placed after Aristotle's works on 'physics' as 'meta ta physika,' meaning 'after physics'. But in fact, metaphysics denotes the science of what is beyond (meta) nature (physika) of an object above the mere material. Many of the early Greek philosophical writings bore the title 'Concerning Nature' (the Greek term for nature was physika). These words usually dealt with what we would now consider physical science, but there were also speculations about the meaning and nature of the universe – that is, with questions which arise after the physical problems have been resolved, or which are concerned with what lies after or beyond the physical world of sensory experience. Thus, etymologically metaphysics denotes the science of what is beyond (meta) the physical nature (physika) of an object.

2. Bernard Lonergan (1904 – 1984) would describe metaphysics as 'the core and ground of human knowledge as it underlies, penetrates, transforms and unifies all other departments of knowledge.' First, it underlies all other departments: It underlies all other departments since its principles are the detached and disinterested drive of the pure desire to know. The unfolding of the pure desire to know takes place in the empirical, intellectual and rational consciousness of the selfaffirming subject. All questions, all insights, all formulations, all reflections and all judgments proceed from the unfolding of that drive. Hence, metaphysics underlies logic, mathematics and all other sciences. Second, it penetrates all other departments: For other departments are constituted of the same principles as that of metaphysics. They are particular departments related to particular viewpoints. Yet, all departments spring from a common source and seek a common compatibility and coherence. Hence, they are penetrated by metaphysics. Third, it transforms all other departments: Metaphysics originates from the 'experience of something'. It is free from the realization of particular viewpoints. It distinguishes positions from counter-positions in the whole of knowledge. It is a transforming principle that urges positions to fuller development. By reversing counter-positions, it liberates discoveries from the shackles in which they



were formulated. Fourth, it unifies all other departments: For other departments respond to particular ranges of questions; whereas metaphysics deals with the original, total question, and in this way, it moves to the total answer transforming and putting together all other answers. Hence, we may define metaphysics as the core and ground of all knowledge, which is the science of being as being.

### **Answers to Check your Progress 2**

1. The formal object of metaphysics is the study of 'being as being,' ens in quantum ens. That is to say, metaphysics does not restrict itself to any particular being or part of that being, but rather treats of what is common to all beings, namely, Being which is the ground of beings since all beings are in Being. Being is not a particular thing though it embraces everything in it.

2. Being is that which is in some way or something. All of us know that everyone has always and everywhere an experience of 'something.' This experience of 'something' is an inescapable experience. One may escape from a particular experience, but one cannot escape from experiencing something. The most fundamental and radical question one can raise is this: 'Is there anything at all?' The answer can either be a negation or an affirmation. If it is a negation it should be so: 'There is nothing.' Such an answer is self-contradictory as the answer affirms a negation which is again 'something.' Hence, an absolute negation is impossible. For, paradoxically every absolute negation presupposes an absolute affirmation upon which the negation rests. This affirmative experience of 'something' is not 'that which is not' but 'that which is' or 'Being' which is in some way or something.

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# UNIT 2: APPEARANCE AND REALITY

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## STRUCTURE

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Appearance and reality
- 2.3 Appearance: Primary and Secondary Qualities
- 2.4 Reality
- 2.5 Let us sum up
- 2.6 Key Words
- 2.7 Questions for Review
- 2.8 Suggested readings and references
- 2.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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After this unit we can able to know:

- To discuss about the Appearance and reality.
- To know about the Appearance: Primary and Secondary Qualities.

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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Engaged on a subject who more than others demands peace of spirit, even before he enters on the controversies of his own field, he finds himself involved in a sort of warfare. He is confronted by prejudices hostile to his study, and he is tempted to lean upon those prejudices, within him and around him, which seem contrary to the first. It is on the preconceptions adverse to metaphysics in general that I am going to make some remarks by way of introduction. We may agree, perhaps, to understand by metaphysics an attempt to know reality as against mere appearance, or the study of first principles or ultimate truths, or again the effort to comprehend the universe, not simply piecemeal or by fragments, but somehow as a whole. Any such pursuit will encounter a number of

objections. It will have to hear that the knowledge which it desires to obtain is impossible altogether; or, if possible in some degree, is yet practically useless; or that, at all events, we can want nothing beyond the old philosophies. And I will say a few words on these arguments in their order. (a)The man who is ready to prove that metaphysical knowledge is wholly impossible has no right here to any answer. He must be referred for conviction to the body of this treatise. And he can hardly refuse to go there, since he himself has, perhaps unknowingly, entered the arena. He is a brother metaphysician with a rival theory of first principles. And this is so plain that I must excuse myself from dwelling on the point. To say the reality is such that our knowledge cannot reach it, is a claim to know reality; to urge that our knowledge is of a kind which must fail to transcend appearance, itself implies that transcendence. For, if we had no idea of a beyond, we should assuredly not know how to talk about failure or success. And the test, by which we distinguish them, must obviously be some acquaintance with the nature of the goal. Nay, the would-be sceptic, who presses on us the contradictions of our thoughts, himself asserts dogmatically. For these contradictions might be ultimate and absolute truth, if the nature of the reality were not known to be otherwise. But this introduction is not the place to discuss a class of objections which are they, however unwillingly, metaphysical views, and which a little acquaintance with the subject commonly serves to dispel. So far as is necessary, they will be dealt with in their proper place; and I will therefore pass to the second main argument against metaphysics. (b)It would be idle to deny that this possesses great force. "Metaphysical knowledge," it insists, "may be possible theoretically, and even actual, if you please, to a certain degree; but, for all that, it is practically no knowledge worth the name." And this objection may be rested on various grounds. I will state some of these, and will make the answers which appear to me to be sufficient. The first reason for refusing to enter on our field is an appeal to the confusion and barrenness which prevail there. "The same problems," we hear it often, "the same disputes, the same sheer failure. Why not abandon it and come out? Is there nothing else more worth your labour?" To this I shall reply more fully soon, but will at present deny entirely that the problems have not altered. The assertion

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is about as true and about as false as would be a statement that human nature has not changed. And it seems indefensible when we consider that in history metaphysics has not only been acted on by the general development, but has also reacted. But, apart from historical questions, which are here not in place, I am inclined to take my stand on the admitted possibility. If the object is not impossible, and the adventure suits us what then? Others far better than ourselves have wholly failed so you say. But the man who succeeds is not apparently always the man of most merit, and even in philosophy's cold world perhaps some fortunes go by favour. One never knows until one tries. But to the question, if seriously I expect to succeed, I must, of course, answer, No. I do not suppose, that is, that satisfactory knowledge is possible. How much we can ascertain about reality will be discussed in this book; but I may say at once that I expect a very partial satisfaction. I am so bold as to believe that we have a knowledge of the Absolute, certain and real, though I am sure that our comprehension is miserably incomplete. But I dissent emphatically from the conclusion that, because imperfect, it is worthless. And I must suggest to the objector that he should open his eyes and should consider human nature. Is it possible to abstain from thought about the universe? I do not mean merely that to every one the whole body of things must come in the gross, whether consciously or unconsciously, in a certain way. I mean that, by various causes, even the average man is compelled to wonder and to reflect. To him the world, and his share in it, is a natural object of thought, and seems likely to remain one. And so, when poetry, art, and religion have ceased wholly to interest, or when they show no longer any tendency to struggle with ultimate problems and to come to an understanding with them; when the sense of mystery and enchantment no longer draws the mind to wander aimlessly and to love it knows not what; when, in short, twilight has no charm then metaphysics will be worthless. For the question (as things are now) is not whether we are to reflect and ponder on ultimate truth for perhaps most of us do that, and are not likely to cease. The question is merely as to the way in which this should be done. And the claim of metaphysics is surely not unreasonable. Metaphysics takes its stand on this side of human nature, this desire to think about and comprehend

reality. And it merely asserts that, if the attempt is to be made, it should be done as thoroughly as our nature permits. There is no claim on its part to supersede other functions of the human mind; but it protests that, if we are to think, we should sometimes try to think properly. And the opponent of metaphysics, it appears to me, is driven to a dilemma. He must either condemn all reflection, on the essence of things, and, if so, he breaks, or, rather, tries to break, with part of the highest side of human nature, or else he allows us to think, but not to think strictly. He permits, that is to say, the exercise of thought so long as it is entangled with other functions of our being; but as soon as it attempts a pure development of its own, guided by the principles of its own distinctive working, he prohibits it forthwith. And this appears to be a paradox, since it seems equivalent to saying, you may satisfy your instinctive longing to reflect, so long as you do it in a way which is unsatisfactory.

If your character is such that in you thought is satisfied by what does not, and cannot, pretend to be thought proper, that is quite legitimate. But if you are constituted otherwise and if in you a more strict thinking is a part of your nature, that is by all means to be crushed out. And, speaking for myself, I must regard this as at once dogmatic and absurd. But the reader, perhaps, may press me with a different objection. Admitting, he may say, that thought about reality is lawful, I still do not understand why, the results being what they are, you should judge it to be desirable. And I will try to answer this frankly. I certainly do not suppose that it would be good for every one to study metaphysics, and I cannot express any opinion as to the number of persons who should do so. But I think it quite necessary, even on the view that this study can produce no positive results, that it should still be pursued. There is, so far as I can see, no other certain way of protecting ourselves against dogmatic superstition. Our orthodox theology on the one side, and our common-place materialism on the other side (it is natural to take these as prominent instances), vanish like ghosts before the daylight of free sceptical enquiry. I do not mean, of course, to condemn wholly either of these beliefs; but I am sure that either, when taken seriously, is the mutilation of our nature. Neither, as experience has amply shown, can now survive

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in the mind which has thought sincerely on first principles; and it seems desirable that there should be such a refuge for the man who burns to think consistently, and yet is too good to become a slave, either to stupid fanaticism or dishonest sophistry. That is one reason why I think that metaphysics, even if it end in total scepticism, should be studied by a certain number of persons. And there is a further reason which, with me perhaps, has even more weight. All of us, I presume, more or less, are led beyond the region of ordinary facts. Some in one way and some in others, we seem to touch and have communion with what is beyond the visible world. In various manners we find something higher, which both supports and humbles both chastens and transports us.

And, with certain persons, the intellectual effort to understand the universe is a principal way of thus experiencing the Deity. No one, probably, who has not felt this, however differently he might describe it, has ever cared much for metaphysics. And, wherever it has been felt strongly, it has been its own justification. The man whose nature is such that by one path alone his chief desire will reach consummation, will try to find it on that path, whatever it may be, and whatever the world thinks of it; and, if he does not, he is contemptible. Self-sacrifice is too often the “great sacrifice” of trade, the giving cheap what is worth nothing. To know what one wants, and to scruple at no means that will get it, may be a harder self-surrender. And this appears to be another reason for some persons pursuing the study of ultimate truth. (c)And that is why, lastly, existing philosophies cannot answer the purpose. For whether there is progress or not, at all events there is change; and the changed minds of each generation will require a difference in what has to satisfy their intellect. Hence there seems as much reason for new philosophy as there is for new poetry. In each case the fresh production is usually much inferior to something already in existence; and yet it answers a purpose if it appeals more personally to the reader. What is really worse may serve better to promote, in certain respects and in a certain generation, the exercise of our best functions. And that is why, so long as we alter, we shall always want, and shall always have, new metaphysics. I will end this introduction with a word of warning.

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## 2.2 APPEARANCE AND REALITY

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We have taken up a number of ways of regarding reality. and we have found that they all are vitiated by self-discrepancy. The reality can accept not one of these predicates, at least in the character in which so far they have come. We certainly ended with a reflection which promised something positive. Whatever is rejected as appearance is, for that very reason, no mere nonentity. It cannot bodily be shelved and merely got rid of, and, therefore, since it must fall somewhere, it must belong to reality. To take it as existing somehow and somewhere in the unreal would surely be quite meaningless. For reality must own and cannot be less than appearance, and that is the one positive result which, so far, we have reached. But as to the character which, otherwise, the real possesses, we at present know nothing; and a further knowledge is what we must aim at through the remainder of our search. The present Book, to some extent, falls into two divisions. The first of these deals mainly with the general character of reality, and with the defence of this against a number of objections. Then from this basis, in the second place, I shall go on to consider mainly some special features. But I must admit that I have kept to no strict principle of division. I have really observed no rule of progress, except to get forward in the best way that I can. At the beginning of our inquiry into the nature of the real we encounter, of course, a general doubt or denial. To know the truth, we shall be told, is impossible, or is, at all events, wholly impracticable. We cannot have positive knowledge about first principles; and, if we could possess it, we should not know when actually we had got it.

This question, to my mind, is answered by a second question: How otherwise should we be able to say anything at all about appearance? For through the last Book, the reader will remember, we were for the most part criticising. We were judging phenomena and were condemning them, and throughout we proceeded as if the self-contradictory could not be real. But this was surely to have and to apply an absolute criterion. For consider: you can scarcely propose to be quite passive when presented with statements about reality. You can hardly take the position of admitting any and every nonsense to be truth, truth absolute and

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entire, at least so far as you know. For, if you think at all so as to discriminate between truth and falsehood, you will find that you cannot accept open self-contradiction. Hence to think is to judge, and to judge is to criticise, and to criticise is to use a criterion of reality. And surely to doubt this would be mere blindness or confused self-deception. But, if so, it is clear that, in rejecting the inconsistent as appearance, we are applying a positive knowledge of the ultimate nature of things. Ultimate reality is such that it does not contradict itself; here is an absolute criterion. And it is proved absolute by the fact that, either in endeavouring to deny it, or even in attempting to doubt it, we tacitly assume its validity. One of these essays in delusion may be noticed briefly in passing. We may be told that our criterion has been developed by experience, and that therefore at least it may not be absolute. But why anything should be weaker for having been developed is, in the first place, not obvious. And, in the second place, the whole doubt, when understood, destroys itself. For the alleged origin of our criterion is delivered to us by knowledge which rests throughout on its application as an absolute test. And what can be more irrational than to try to prove that a principle is doubtful, when the proof through every step rests on its unconditional truth? It would, of course, not be irrational to take one's stand on this criterion, to use it to produce a conclusion hostile to itself, and to urge that therefore our whole knowledge is self-destructive, since it essentially drives us to what we cannot accept. But this is not the result which our supposed objector has in view, or would welcome. He makes no attempt to show in general that a psychological growth is in any way hostile to metaphysical validity. And he is not prepared to give up his own psychological knowledge, which knowledge plainly is ruined if the criterion is not absolute. The doubt is seen, when we reflect, to be founded on that which it endeavours to question. And it has but blindly borne witness to the absolute certainty of our knowledge about reality. Thus we possess a criterion, and our criterion is supreme. I do not mean to deny that we might have several standards, giving us sundry pieces of information about the nature of things. But, be that as it may, we still have an over-ruling test of truth, and the various standards (if they exist)



are certainly subordinate. This at once becomes evident, for we cannot refuse to bring such standards together, and to ask if they agree.

Or, at least, if a doubt is suggested as to their consistency, each with itself and with the rest, we are compelled, so to speak, to assume jurisdiction. And if they were guilty of self-contradiction, when examined or compared, we should condemn them as appearance. But we could not do that if they were not subject all to one tribunal. And hence, as we find nothing not subordinate to the test of self-consistency, we are forced to set that down as supreme and absolute. But it may be said that this supplies us with no real information. If we think, then certainly we are not allowed to be inconsistent, and it is admitted that this test is unconditional and absolute. But it will be urged that, for knowledge about any matter, we require something more than a bare negation. The ultimate reality (we are agreed) does not permit self-contradiction, but a prohibition or an absence (we shall be told) by itself does not amount to positive knowledge. The denial of inconsistency, therefore, does not predicate any positive quality. But such an objection is untenable. It may go so far as to assert that a bare denial is possible, that we may reject a predicate though we stand on no positive basis, and though there is nothing special which serves to reject. This error has been refuted in my *Principles of Logic* (Book I., Chapter iii.), and I do not propose to discuss it here. I will pass to another sense in which the objection may seem more plausible. The criterion, it may be urged, in itself is doubtless positive; but, for our knowledge and in effect, is merely negative. And it gives us therefore no information at all about reality, for, although knowledge is there, it cannot be brought out. The criterion is a basis, which serves as the foundation of denial; but, since this basis cannot be exposed, we are but able to stand on it and unable to see it. And it hence, in effect, tells us nothing, though there are assertions which it does not allow us to venture on. This objection, when stated in such a form, may seem plausible, and there is a sense in which I am prepared to admit that it is valid. If by the nature of reality we understand its full nature, I am not contending that this in a complete form is knowable. But that is very far from being the point here at issue. For the objection denies that we

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have a standard which gives any positive knowledge, any information, complete or incomplete, about the genuine reality. And this denial assuredly is mistaken. The objection admits that we know what reality does, but it refuses to allow us any understanding of what reality is. The standard (it is agreed) both exists and possesses a positive character, and it is agreed that this character rejects inconsistency. It is admitted that we know this, and the point at issue is whether such knowledge supplies any positive information. And to my mind this question seems not hard to answer. For I cannot see how, when I observe a thing at work, I am to stand there and to insist that I know nothing of its nature. I fail to perceive how a function is nothing at all, or how it does not positively qualify that to which I attribute it. To know only so much, I admit, may very possibly be useless; it may leave us without the information which we desire most to obtain; but, for all that, it is not total ignorance. Our standard denies inconsistency, and therefore asserts consistency. If we can be sure that the inconsistent is unreal, we must, logically, be just as sure that the reality is consistent. The question is solely as to the meaning to be given to consistency. We have now seen that it is not the bare exclusion of discord, for that is merely our abstraction, and is otherwise nothing. And our result, so far, is this. Reality is known to possess a positive character, but this character is at present determined only as that which excludes contradiction. But we may make a further advance. We saw (in the preceding chapter) that all appearance must belong to reality. For what appears is, and whatever is cannot fall outside the real. And we may now combine this result with the conclusion just reached. We may say that everything, which appears, is somehow real in such a way as to be self-consistent. The character of the real is to possess everything phenomenal in a harmonious form. I will repeat the same truth in other words. Reality is one in this sense that it has a positive nature exclusive of discord, a nature which must hold throughout everything that is to be real. Its diversity can be diverse only so far as not to clash, and what seems otherwise anywhere cannot be real. And, from the other side, everything which appears must be real. Appearance must belong to reality, and it must therefore be concordant and other than it seems. The bewildering mass of phenomenal diversity must hence somehow be at

unity and self-consistent; for it cannot be elsewhere than in reality, and reality excludes discord. Or again we may put it so: the real is individual. It is one in the sense that its positive character embraces all differences in an inclusive harmony. And this knowledge, poor as it may be, is certainly more than bare negation or simple ignorance. So far as it goes, it gives us positive news about absolute reality. Let us try to carry this conclusion a step farther on. We know that the real is one; but its oneness, so far, is ambiguous. Is it one system, possessing diversity as an adjective; or is its consistency, on the other hand, an attribute of independent realities? We have to ask, in short, if a plurality of reals is possible, and if these can merely co-exist so as not to be discrepant? Such a plurality would mean a number of beings not dependent on each other. On the one hand they would possess somehow the phenomenal diversity, for that possession, we have seen, is essential. And, on the other hand, they would be free from external disturbance and from inner discrepancy. After the enquiries of our First Book the possibility of such reals hardly calls for discussion. For the internal states of each give rise to hopeless difficulties. And, in the second place, the plurality of the reals cannot be reconciled with their independence. I will briefly resume the arguments which force us to this latter result. If the Many are supposed to be without internal quality, each would forthwith become nothing, and we must therefore take each as being internally somewhat. And, if they are to be plural, they must be a diversity somehow co-existing together. Any attempt again to take their togetherness as unessential seems to end in the unmeaning. We have no knowledge of a plural diversity, nor can we attach any sense to it, if we do not have it somehow as one. And, if we abstract from this unity, we have also therewith abstracted from the plurality, and are left with mere being. Can we then have a plurality of independent reals which merely co-exist? No, for absolute independence and co-existence are incompatible. Absolute independence is an idea which consists merely in one-sided abstraction. It is made by an attempted division of the aspect of several existence from the aspect of relatedness; and these aspects, whether in fact or thought, are really indivisible. If we take the diversity of our reals to be such as we discover in feeling and at a stage where relations do not exist,

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that diversity is never found except as one integral character of an undivided whole. And if we forcibly abstract from that unity, then together with feeling we have destroyed the diversity of feeling. We are left not with plurality, but with mere being, or, if you prefer it, with nothing. Co-existence in feeling is hence an instance and a proof not of self-sufficiency, but of dependence, and beside this it would add a further difficulty. If the nature of our reals is the diversity found at a stage below relations, how are we to dispose of the mass of relational appearance? For that exists, and existing it must somehow qualify the world, a world the reality of which is discovered only at a level other than its own. Such a position would seem not easy to justify. Thus a mode of togetherness such as we can verify in feeling destroys the independence of our reals. And they will fare no better if we seek to find their co-existence elsewhere. For any other verifiable way of togetherness must involve relations, and they are fatal to self-sufficiency. Relations, we saw, are a development of and from the felt totality. They inadequately express, and they still imply in the background that unity apart from which the diversity is nothing. Relations are unmeaning except within and on the basis of a substantial whole, and related terms, if made absolute, are forthwith destroyed. Plurality and relatedness are but features and aspects of a unity. If the relations in which the reals somehow stand are viewed as essential, that, as soon as we understand it, involves at once the internal relativity of the reals. And any attempt to maintain the relations as merely external must fail. For if, wrongly and for argument's sake, we admit processes and arrangements which do not qualify their terms, yet such arrangements, if admitted, are at any rate not ultimate. The terms would be prior and independent only with regard to these arrangements, and they would remain relative otherwise, and vitally dependent on some whole. And severed from this unity, the terms perish by the very stroke which aims to set them up as absolute. The reals therefore cannot be self-existent, and, if self-existent, yet taken as the world they would end in inconsistency. For the relations, because they exist, must somehow qualify the world. The relations then must externally qualify the sole and self-contained reality, and that seems selfcontradictory or meaningless. And if it is urged that a plurality of independent beings may be

unintelligible, but that after all some unintelligible facts must be affirmed—the answer is obvious. An unintelligible fact may be admitted so far as, first, it is a fact, and so far as, secondly, it has a meaning which does not contradict itself internally or make self-discrepant our view of the world. But the alleged independence of the reals is no fact, but a theoretical construction; and, so far as it has a meaning, that meaning contradicts itself, and issues in chaos. A reality of this kind may safely be taken as unreal. We cannot therefore maintain a plurality save as dependent on the relations in which it stands. Or if desiring to avoid relations we fall back on the diversity given in feeling, the result is the same. The plurality then sinks to become merely an integral aspect in a single substantial unity, and the reals have vanished.

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### **2.3 APPEARANCE: PRIMARY AND SECONDARY QUALITIES**

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The fact of illusion and error is in various ways forced early upon the mind; and the ideas by which we try to understand the universe, may be considered as attempts to set right our failure. In this division of my work I shall criticize some of these, and shall endeavour to show that they have not reached their object. I shall point out that the world, as so understood, contradicts itself; and is therefore appearance, and not reality. In this chapter I will begin with the proposal to make things intelligible by the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. This view is old, but, I need hardly say, is far from obsolete, nor can it ever disappear. From time to time, without doubt, so long as there are human beings, it will reappear as the most advanced and as the one scientific theory of first principles. And I begin with it, because it is so simple, and in the main so easily disposed of. The primary qualities are those aspects of what we perceive or feel, which, in a word, are spatial; and the residue is secondary. The solution of the world's enigma lies in taking the former as reality, and everything else somehow as derivative, and as more or less justifiable appearance. The foundation of this view will be known to the reader, but for the sake of clearness I must trace it in outline. We assume that a thing must be self-consistent and self-dependent. It either has a quality or has not got it. And, if it has it, it can not have it only

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sometimes, and merely in this or that relation. But such a principle is the condemnation of secondary qualities. It matters very little how in detail we work with it. A thing is coloured, but not coloured in the same way to every eye; and, except to some eye, it seems not coloured at all. Is it then coloured or not? And the eye relation to which appears somehow to make the quality does that itself possess colour? Clearly not so, unless there is another eye which sees it. Nothing therefore is really coloured; colour seems only to belong to what itself is colourless. And the same result holds, again, with cold and heat. A thing may be cold or hot according to different parts of my skin; and, without some relation to a skin, it seems without any such quality. And, by a like argument, the skin is proved not itself to own the quality, which is hence possessed by nothing. And sounds, not heard, are hardly real; while what hears them is the ear, itself not audible, nor even always in the enjoyment of sound. With smell and with taste the case seems almost worse; for they are more obviously mixed up with our pleasure and pain. If a thing tastes only in the mouth, is taste its quality? Has it smell where there is no nose? But nose and tongue are smelt or tasted only by another nose or tongue; nor can either again be said to have as a quality what they sometimes enjoy. And the pleasant and disgusting, which we boldly locate in the object, how can they be there? Is a thing delightful or sickening really and in itself? Am even I the constant owner of these wandering adjectives? But I will not weary the reader by insistence on detail. The argument shows everywhere that things have secondary qualities only for an organ; and that the organ itself has these qualities in no other way. They are found to be adjectives, somehow supervening on relations of the extended. The extended only is real. And the facts of what is called subjective sensation, under which we may include dream and delusion of all kinds, may be adduced in support. They go to show that, as we can have the sensation without the object, and the object without the sensation, the one cannot possibly be a quality of the other. The secondary qualities, therefore, are appearance, coming from the reality, which itself has no quality but extension. This argument has two sides, a negative and a positive. The first denies that secondary qualities are the actual nature of things, the second goes on to make an affirmation about the primary. I

will enquire first if the negative assertion is justified. I will not dispute the truth of the principle that, if a thing has a quality, it must have it; but I will ask whether on this basis some defence may not be made. And we may attempt it in this way. All the arguments, we may protest, do but show defect in, or interference with, the organ of perception. The fact that I cannot receive the secondary qualities except under certain conditions, fails to prove that they are not there and existing in the thing. And, supposing that they are there, still the argument proves their absence, and is hence unsound. And sheer delusion and dreams do not overthrow this defence. The qualities are constant in the things themselves; and, if they fail to impart themselves, or impart themselves wrongly, that is always due to something outside their nature. If we could perceive them, they are there. But this way of defence seems hardly tenable. For, if the qualities impart themselves never except under conditions, how in the end are we to say what they are when unconditioned? Having once begun, and having been compelled, to take their appearance into the account, we cannot afterwards strike it out. It being admitted that the qualities come to us always in a relation, and always as appearing, then certainly we know them only as appearance. And the mere supposition that in themselves they may really be what they are, seems quite meaningless or self-destructive. Further, we may enforce this conclusion by a palpable instance. To hold that one's mistress is charming, ever and in herself, is an article of faith, and beyond reach of question. But, if we turn to common things, the result will be otherwise. We observed that the disgusting and the pleasant may make part of the character of a taste or a smell, while to take these aspects as a constant quality, either of the thing or of the organ, seems more than unjustifiable, and even almost ridiculous. And on the whole we must admit that the defence has broken down. The secondary qualities must be judged to be merely appearance. But are they the appearance of the primary, and are these the reality? The positive side of the contention was that in the extended we have the essence of the thing; and it is necessary to ask if this conclusion is true. The doctrine is, of course, materialism, and is a very simple creed. What is extended, together with its spatial relations, is substantive fact, and the rest is

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adjectival. We have not to ask here if this view is scientific, in the sense of being necessarily used for work in some sciences. That has, of course, nothing to do with the question now before us, since we are enquiring solely whether the doctrine is true. And, regarded in this way, perhaps no student would call materialism scientific. I will indicate briefly the arguments against the sole reality of primary qualities. (a) In the first place, we may ask how, in the nature the extended, the terms stand to the relations which have to hold between them. This is a problem to be handled later (Chapter iv.), and I will only remark here that its result is fatal to materialism. And, (b) in the second place, the relation of the primary qualities to the secondary in which class feeling and thought have presumably to be placed seems wholly unintelligible. For nothing is actually removed from existence by being labelled “ appearance.” What appears is there, and must be dealt with; but materialism has no rational way of dealing with appearance. Appearance must belong, and yet cannot belong, to the extended. It neither is able to fall somewhere apart, since there is no other real place; nor ought it, since, if so, the relation would vanish and appearance would cease to be derivative. But, on the other side, if it belongs in any sense to the reality, how can it be shown not to infect that with its own unreal character? Or we may urge that matter must cease to be itself, if qualified essentially by all that is secondary. But, taken otherwise, it has become itself but one out of two elements, and is not the reality. And, © thirdly, the line of reasoning which showed that secondary qualities are not real, has equal force as applied to primary. The extended comes to us only by relation to an organ; and, whether the organ is touch or is sight or muscle-feeling or whatever else it may be makes no difference to the argument. For, in any case, the thing is perceived by us through an affection of our body, and never without that. And our body itself is no exception, for we perceive that, as extended, solely by the action of one part upon another percipient part. That we have no miraculous intuition of our body as spatial reality is perfectly certain. But, if so, the extended thing will have its quality only when perceived by something else; and the percipient something else is again in the same case. Nothing, in short, proves extended except in relation to another thing, which itself does not possess the quality, if



you try to take it by itself. And, further, the objection from dream and delusion holds again. That objection urges that error points to a necessary relation of the object to our knowledge, even where error is not admitted. But such a relation would reduce every quality to appearance. We might, indeed, attempt once more here to hold the former line of defence. We might reply that the extended thing is a fact real by itself, and that only its relation to our percipience is variable. But the inevitable conclusion is not so to be averted. If a thing is known to have a quality only under a certain condition, there is no process of reasoning from this which will justify the conclusion that the thing, if unconditioned, is yet the same. This seems quite certain; and, to go further, if we have no other source of information, if the quality in question is non-existent for us except in one relation, then for us to assert its reality away from that relation is more than unwarranted. It is, to speak plainly, an attempt in the end without meaning. And it would seem that, if materialism is to stand, it must somehow get to the existence of primary qualities in a way which avoids their relation to an organ. But since, as we shall hereafter see (Chapter iv.), their very essence is relative, even this refuge is closed. (d) But there is a more obvious argument against the sole reality of spatial qualities; and, if I were writing for the people an attack upon materialism, I should rest great weight on this point. Without secondary quality extension is not conceivable, and no one can bring it, as existing, before his mind if he keeps it quite pure. In short, it is the violent abstraction of one aspect from the rest, and the mere confinement of our attention to a single side of things, a fiction which, forgetting itself, takes a ghost for solid reality. And I will say a few words on this obvious answer to materialism. That doctrine, of course, holds that the extended can be actual, entirely apart from every other quality. But extension is never so given. If it is visual, it must be coloured; and if it is tactual, or acquired in the various other ways which may fall under the head of the “muscular sense,” then it is never free from sensations, coming from the skin, or the joints, or the muscles, or, as some would like to add, from a central source. And a man may say what he likes, but he cannot think of extension without thinking at the same time of a “what” that is extended. And not only is this so, but particular differences, such as “up and down,” “right and left,” are

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necessary to the terms of the spatial relation. But these differences clearly are not merely spatial. Like the general “ what,” they will consist in all cases of secondary quality from a sensation of the kinds I have mentioned above. Some psychologists, indeed, could go further, and could urge that the secondary qualities are original, and the primary derivative; since extension (in their view) is a construction or growth from the wholly non-extended. I could not endorse that, but I can appeal to what is indisputable. Extension cannot be presented, or thought of, except as one with quality that is secondary. It is by itself a mere abstraction, for some purposes necessary, but ridiculous when taken as an existing thing. Yet the materialist, from defect of nature or of education, or probably both, worships without justification this thin product of his untutored fancy. “ Not without justification,” he may reply, “since in the procedure of science the secondary qualities are explained as results from the primary.

Obviously, therefore, these latter are independent and prior.” But this is a very simple error. For suppose that you have shown that, given one element, A, another, b, does in fact follow on it; suppose that you can prove that b comes just the same, whether A is attended by c, or d, or e, or any one of a number of other qualities, you cannot go from this to the result that A exists and works naked. The secondary b can be explained, you urge, as issuing from the primary A, without consideration of aught else. Let it be so; but all that could follow is, that the special natures of A’s accompaniments are not concerned in the process. There is not only no proof, but there is not even the very smallest presumption, that A could act by itself, or could be a real fact if alone. It is doubtless scientific to disregard certain aspects when we work; but to urge that therefore such aspects are not fact, and that what we use without regard to them is an independent real thing, this is barbarous metaphysics. We have found then that, if the secondary qualities are appearance, the primary are certainly not able to stand by themselves. This distinction, from which materialism is blindly developed, has been seen to bring us no nearer to the true nature of reality.

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## 2.4 REALITY

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OUR result so far is this. Everything phenomenal is somehow real; and the absolute must at least be as rich as the relative. And, further, the Absolute is not many; there are no independent reals. The universe is one in this sense that its differences exist harmoniously within one whole, beyond which there is nothing. Hence the Absolute is, so far, an individual and a system, but, if we stop here, it remains but formal and abstract. Can we then, the question is, say anything about the concrete nature of the system? Certainly, I think, this is possible. When we ask as to the matter which fills up the empty outline, we can reply in one word, that this matter is experience. And experience means something much the same as given and present fact. We perceive, on reflection, that to be real, or even barely to exist, must be to fall within sentience. Sentient experience, in short, is reality, and what is not this is not real. We may say, in other words, that there is no being or fact outside of that which is commonly called psychological existence. Feeling, thought, and volition (any groups under which we class psychological phenomena) are all the material of existence, and there is no other material, actual or even possible. This result in its general form seems evident at once; and, however serious a step we now seem to have taken, there would be no advantage at this point in discussing it at length. For the test in the main lies ready to our hand, and the decision rests on the manner in which it is applied. I will state the case briefly thus. Find any piece of existence, take up anything that any one could possibly call a fact, or could in any sense assert to have being, and then judge if it does not consist in sentient experience. Try to discover any sense in which you can still continue to speak of it, when all perception and feeling have been removed; or point out any fragment of its matter, any aspect of its being, which is not derived from and is not still relative to this source. When the experiment is made strictly, I can myself conceive of nothing else than the experienced. Anything, in no sense felt or perceived, becomes to me quite unmeaning. And as I cannot try to think of it without realising either that I am not thinking at all, or that I am thinking of it against my will as being experienced, I am driven to the conclusion that for me experience is the same as reality. The fact that falls elsewhere seems, in my mind, to be a

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mere word and a failure, or else an attempt at self-contradiction. It is a vicious abstraction whose existence is meaningless nonsense, and is therefore not possible. This conclusion is open, of course, to grave objection, and must in its consequences give rise to serious difficulties. I will not attempt to anticipate the discussion of these, but before passing on, will try to obviate a dangerous mistake. For, in asserting that the real is nothing but experience, I may be understood to endorse a common error. I may be taken first to divide the percipient subject from the universe; and then, resting on that subject, as on a thing actual by itself, I may be supposed to urge that it cannot transcend its own states. Such an argument would lead to impossible results, and would stand on a foundation of faulty abstraction. To set up the subject as real independently of the whole, and to make the whole into experience in the sense of an adjective of that subject, seems to me indefensible. And when I contend that reality must be sentient, my conclusion almost consists in the denial of this fundamental error. For if, seeking for reality, we go to experience, what we certainly do not find is a subject or an object, or indeed any other thing whatever, standing separate and on its own bottom. What we discover rather is a whole in which distinctions can be made, but in which divisions do not exist. And this is the point on which I insist, and it is the very ground on which I stand, when I urge that reality is sentient experience. I mean that to be real is to be indissolubly one thing with sentience. It is to be something which comes as a feature and aspect within one whole of feeling, something which, except as an integral element of such sentience, has no meaning at all. And what I repudiate is the separation of feeling from the felt, or of the desired from desire, or of what is thought from thinking, or the division—I might add— of anything from anything else. Nothing is ever so presented as real by itself, or can be argued so to exist without demonstrable fallacy. And in asserting that the reality is experience, I rest throughout on this foundation. You cannot find fact unless in unity with sentience, and one cannot in the end be divided from the other, either actually or in idea. But to be utterly indivisible from feeling or perception, to be an integral element in a whole which is experienced, this surely is itself to be experience. Being and reality are, in brief, one thing with sentience; they

can neither be opposed to, nor even in the end distinguished from it. I am well aware that this statement stands in need of explanation and defence. This will, I hope, be supplied by succeeding chapters, and I think it better for the present to attempt to go forward. Our conclusion, so far, will be this, that the Absolute is one system, and that its contents are nothing but sentient experience. It will hence be a single and all-inclusive experience, which embraces every partial diversity in concord. For it cannot be less than appearance, and hence no feeling or thought, of any kind, can fall outside its limits. And if it is more than any feeling or thought which we know, it must still remain more of the same nature. It cannot pass into another region beyond what falls under the general head of sentience. For to assert that possibility would be in the end to use words without a meaning. We can entertain no such suggestion except as self-contradictory, and as therefore impossible. This conclusion will, I trust, at the end of my work bring more conviction to the reader; for we shall find that it is the one view which will harmonise all facts. And the objections brought against it, when it and they are once properly defined, will prove untenable. But our general result is at present seriously defective; and we must now attempt to indicate and remedy its failure in principle. What we have secured, up to this point, may be called mere theoretical consistency. The Absolute holds all possible content in an individual experience where no contradiction can remain. And it seems, at first sight, as if this theoretical perfection could exist together with practical defect and misery. For apparently, so far as we have gone, an experience might be harmonious, in such a way at least as not to contradict itself, and yet might result on the whole in a balance of suffering. Now no one can genuinely believe that sheer misery, however self-consistent, is good and desirable. And the question is whether in this way our conclusion is wrecked. There may be those possibly who here would join issue at once. They might perhaps wish to contend that the objection is irrelevant, since pain is no evil. I shall discuss the general question of good and evil in a subsequent chapter, and will merely say here that for myself I cannot stand upon the ground that pain is no evil. I admit, or rather I would assert, that a result, if it fails to satisfy our whole nature, comes short of perfection. And I could not rest tranquilly in a

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truth if I were compelled to regard it as hateful. While unable, that is, to deny it, I should, rightly, or wrongly, insist that the enquiry was not yet closed, and that the result was but partial. And if metaphysics is to stand, it must, I think, take account of all sides of our being. I do not mean that every one of our desires must be met by a promise of particular satisfaction; for that would be absurd and utterly impossible. But if the main tendencies of our nature do not reach consummation in the Absolute, we cannot believe that we have attained to perfection and truth. And we shall have to consider later on what desires must be taken as radical and fundamental. But here we have seen that our conclusion, so far, has a serious defect, and the question is whether this defect can be directly remedied. We have been resting on the theoretical standard which guarantees that Reality is a self consistent system. Have we a practical standard which now can assure us that this system will satisfy our desire for perfect good? An affirmative answer seems plausible, but I do not think it would be true. Without any doubt we possess a practical standard; but that does not seem to me to yield a conclusion about reality, or it will not give us at least directly the result we are seeking.

Nor need I separate myself at this stage from the intelligent Hedonist, since, in my judgment, practical perfection will carry a balance of pleasure. These points I shall have to discuss, and for the present am content to assume them provisionally and vaguely. Now taking the practical end as individuality, or as clear pleasure, or rather as both in one, the question is whether this end is known to be realised in the Absolute, and, if so, upon what foundation such knowledge can rest. It apparently cannot be drawn directly from the theoretical criterion, and the question is whether the practical standard can supply it. I will explain why I believe that this cannot be the case. I will first deal briefly with the “ontological” argument. The essential nature of this will, I hope, be more clear to us hereafter (Chapter xxiv.), and I will here merely point out why it fails to give us help. This argument might be stated in several forms, but the main point is very simple. We have the idea of perfection—there is no doubt as to that—and the question is whether perfection also actually exists. Now the ontological view urges that the

fact of the idea proves the fact of the reality; or, to put it otherwise, it argues that, unless perfection existed, you could not have it in idea, which is agreed to be the case. I shall not discuss at present the validity of this argument, but will confine myself to denying its applicability. For, if an idea has been manufactured and is composed of elements taken up from more than one source, then the result of manufacture need not as a whole exist out of my thought, however much that is the case with its separate elements. Thus we might admit that, in one sense, perfection or completeness would not be present in idea unless also it were real. We might admit this, and yet we might deny the same conclusion with respect to practical perfection. For the perfection that is real might simply be theoretical. It might mean system so far as system is mere theoretical harmony and does not imply pleasure. And the element of pleasure, taken up from elsewhere, may then have been added in our minds to this valid idea. But, if so, the addition may be incongruous, incompatible, and really, if we knew it, contradictory. Pleasure and system perhaps are in truth a false compound, an appearance which exists, as such, only in our heads; just as would be the case if we thought, for example, of a perfect finite being. Hence the ontological argument cannot prove the existence of practical perfection; and let us go on to enquire if any other proof exists. It is in some ways natural to suppose that the practical end somehow postulates its existence as a fact. But a more careful examination tends to dissipate this idea. The moral end, it is clear, is not pronounced by morality to have actual existence. This is quite plain, and it would be easier to contend that morality even postulates the opposite (Chapter xxv.). Certainly, as we shall perceive hereafter, the religious consciousness does imply the reality of that object, which also is its goal. But a religion whose object is perfect will be founded on inconsistency, even more than is the case with mere morality. For such a religion, if it implies the existence of its ideal, implies at the same time a feature which is quite incompatible. This we shall discuss in a later chapter, and all that I will urge here is that the religious consciousness cannot prove that perfection really exists. For it is not true that in all religions the object is perfection; nor, where it is so, does religion possess any right to dictate to or to dominate over thought.

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It does not follow that a belief must be admitted to be true, because, given a certain influence, it is practically irresistible. There is a tendency in religion to take the ideal as existing; and this tendency sways our minds and, under certain conditions, may amount to compulsion. But it does not, therefore, and merely for this reason, give us truth, and we may recall other experience which forces us to doubt. A man, for instance, may love a woman whom, when he soberly considers, he cannot think true, and yet, in the intoxication of her presence, may give up his whole mind to the suggestions of blind passion. But in all cases, that alone is really valid for the intellect, which in a calm moment the mere intellect is incapable of doubting. It is only that which for thought is compulsory and irresistible—only that which thought must assert in attempting to deny it --which is a valid foundation for metaphysical truth. “But how,” I may be asked, “ can you justify this superiority of the intellect, this predominance of thought? On what foundation, if on any, does such a despotism rest? For there seems no special force in the intellectual axiom if you regard it impartially. Nay, if you consider the question without bias, and if you reflect on the nature of axioms in general, you may be brought to a wholly different conclusion. For all axioms, as a matter of fact, are practical. They all depend upon the will. They none of them in the end can amount to more than the impulse to behave in a certain way. And they cannot express more than this impulse, together with the impossibility of satisfaction unless it is complied with. And hence, the intellect, far from possessing a right to predominate, is simply one instance and one symptom of practical compulsion. Or (to put the case more psychologically) the intellect is merely one result of the general working of pleasure and pain. It is even subordinate, and therefore its attempt at despotism is founded on baseless pretensions.” Now, apart from its dubious psychological setting, I can admit the general truth contained in this objection. The theoretical axiom is the statement of an impulse to act in a certain manner. When that impulse is not satisfied there ensues disquiet and movement in a certain direction, until such a character is given to the result as contents the impulse and produces rest. And the expression of this fundamental principle of action is what we call an axiom. Take, for example, the law of avoiding contradiction.



When two elements will not remain quietly together but collide and struggle, we cannot rest satisfied with that state. Our impulse is to alter it, and, on the theoretical side, to bring the content to a shape where without collision the variety is thought as one. And this inability to rest otherwise, and this tendency to alter in a certain way and direction, is, when reflected on and made explicit, our axiom and our intellectual standard. "But is not this," I may be asked further, "a surrender of your position? Does not this admit that the criterion used for theory is merely a practical impulse, a tendency to movement from one side of our being? And, if so, how can the intellectual standard be predominant?" But it is necessary here to distinguish. The whole question turns on the difference between the several impulses of our being. You may call the intellect, if you like, a mere tendency to movement, but you must remember that it is a movement of a very special kind. I shall enter more fully into the nature of thinking hereafter, but the crucial point may be stated at once. In thought the standard, you may say, amounts merely to "act so"; but then "act so" means "think so," and "think so" means "it is." And the psychological origin and base of this movement, and of this inability to act otherwise, may be anything you please; for that is all utterly irrelevant to the metaphysical issue. Thinking is the attempt to satisfy a special impulse, and the attempt implies an assumption about reality. You may avoid the assumption so far as you decline to think, but, if you sit down to the game, there is only one way of playing. In order to think at all you must subject yourself to a standard, a standard which implies an absolute knowledge of reality; and while you doubt this, you accept it, and obey while you rebel. You may urge that thought, after all, is inconsistent, because appearance is not got rid of but merely shelved. That is another question which will engage us in a future chapter, and here may be dismissed. For in any case thinking means the acceptance of a certain standard, and that standard, in any case, is an assumption as to the character of reality. "But why," it may be objected, "is this assumption better than what holds for practice? Why is the theoretical to be superior to the practical end?" I have never said that this is so. To fail in any way would introduce a discord into perception itself. And hence, since we have found that, taken perceptively, reality is harmonious, it

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must be harmonious altogether, and must satisfy our whole nature. Let us see if on this line we can make an advance. If the Absolute is to be theoretically harmonious, its elements must not collide. Idea must not disagree with sensation, nor must sensations clash. In every case, that is, the struggle must not be a mere struggle. There must be a unity which it subserves, and a whole, taken in which it is a struggle no longer. How this resolution is possible we may be able to see partly in our subsequent chapters, but for the present I would insist merely that somehow it must exist. Since reality is harmonious, the struggle of diverse elements, sensations or ideas, barely to qualify the self-same point must be precluded. But, if idea must not clash with sensation, then there cannot in the Absolute be unsatisfied desire or any practical unrest. For in these there is clearly an ideal element not concordant with presentation but struggling against it, and, if you remove this discordance, then with it all unsatisfied desire is gone. In order for such a desire, in even its lowest form, to persist, there must (so far as I can see) be an idea qualifying diversely a sensation and fixed for the moment in discord.

And any such state is not compatible with theoretical harmony. But this result perhaps has ignored an outstanding possibility. Unsatisfied desires might, as such, not exist in the Absolute, and yet seemingly there might remain a clear balance of pain. For, in the first place, it is not proved that all pain must arise from an unresolved struggle; and it may be contended, in the second place, that possibly the discord might be resolved, and yet, so far as we know, the pain might remain. In a painful struggle it may be urged that the pain can be real, though the struggle is apparent. For we shall see, when we discuss error (Chapter xvi.), how discordant elements may be neutralised in a wider complex. We shall find how, in that system, they can take on a different arrangement, and so result in harmony. And the question here as to unsatisfied desires will be this. Can they not be merged in a whole, so as to lose their character of discordance, and thus cease to be desires, while their pain none the less survives in reality? If so, that whole, after all, would be imperfect. For, while possessor of harmony, it still might be sunk in misery, or might suffer at least with a balance of pain. This objection is serious, and it

calls for some discussion here. I shall have to deal with it once more in our concluding chapter. I feel at this point our want of knowledge with regard to the conditions of pleasure and pain. It is a tenable view, one at least which can hardly be refuted, that pain is caused, or conditioned, by an unresolved collision. Now, if this really is the case, then, given harmony, a balance of pain is impossible. Pain, of course, is a fact, and no fact can be conjured away from the universe; but the question here is entirely as to a balance of pain. Now it is common experience that in mixed states pain may be neutralised by pleasure in such a way that the balance is decidedly pleasant. And hence it is possible that in the universe as a whole we may have a balance of pleasure, and in the total result no residue of pain. This is possible, and if an unresolved conflict and discord is essential to pain, it is much more than possible. Since the reality is harmonious, and since harmony excludes the conditions which are requisite for a balance of pain, that balance is impossible. I will urge this so far as to raise a very grave doubt. I question our right even to suppose a state of pain in the Absolute. And this doubt becomes more grave when we consider another point. When we pass from the conditions to the effects of painful feeling, we are on surer ground. For in our experience the result of pain is disquietude and unrest. Its main action is to set up change, and to prevent stability. There is authority, I am aware, for a different view, but, so far as I see, that view cannot be reconciled with facts. This effect of pain has here a most important bearing. Assume that in the Absolute there is a balance of pleasure, and all is consistent. For the pains can condition those processes which, as processes, disappear in the life of the whole; and these pains can be neutralised by an overplus of pleasure. But if you suppose, on the other hand, a balance of pain, the difficulty becomes at once insuperable. We have postulated a state of harmony, and, together with that, the very condition of instability and discord. We have in the Absolute, on one side, a state of things where the elements cannot jar, and where in particular idea does not conflict with presentation. But with pain on the other side, we have introduced a main-spring of change and unrest, and we thus produce necessarily an idea not in harmony with existence. And this idea of a better and of a non-existing condition of things must

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directly destroy theoretical rest. But, if so, such an idea must be called impossible. There is no pain on the whole, and in the Absolute our whole nature must find satisfaction. For otherwise there is no theoretical harmony, and that harmony we saw must certainly exist. I shall ask in our last chapter if there is a way of avoiding this conclusion, but for the present we seem bound to accept it as true. We must not admit the possibility of an Absolute perfect in apprehension yet resting tranquilly in pain.

We cannot argue directly that all sides of our nature must be satisfied, but indirectly we are led to the same result. For we are forced to assume theoretical satisfaction; and to suppose that existing one-sidedly, and together with practical discomfort, appears inadmissible. Such a state is a possibility which seems to contradict itself. It is a supposition to which, if we cannot find any ground in its favour, we have no right. For the present at least it is better to set it down as inconceivable. And hence, for the present at least, we must believe that reality satisfies our whole being. Our main wants— for truth and life, and for beauty and goodness—must all find satisfaction. And we have seen that this consummation must somehow be experience, and be individual. Every element of the universe, sensation, feeling, thought and will, must be included within one comprehensive sentience. And the question which now occurs is whether really we have a positive idea of such sentience. Do we at all know what we mean when we say that it is actual? Fully to realise the existence of the Absolute is for finite beings impossible. In order thus to know we should have to be, and then we should not exist. This result is certain, and all attempts to avoid it are illusory. But then the whole question turns on the sense in which we are to understand “ knowing.” What is impossible is to construct absolute life in its detail, to have the specific experience in which it consists. But to gain an idea of its main features—an idea true so far as it goes, though abstract and incomplete—is a different endeavour. And it is a task, so far as I see, in which we may succeed. For these main features, to some extent, are within our own experience; and again the idea of their combination is, in the abstract, quite intelligible. And surely no more than this is wanted for a

knowledge of the Absolute. It is a knowledge which of course differs enormously from the fact. But it is true, for all that, while it respects its own limits; and it seems fully attainable by the finite intellect. I will end this chapter by briefly mentioning the sources of such knowledge.

**Check Your Progress 1**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

- 1. Discuss about the Appearance and reality.

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- 2. How do you know about the Appearance: Primary and Secondary Qualities?

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**2.5 LET US SUM UP**

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Only here, that is, in metaphysics, I must be allowed to reply, we are acting theoretically. We are occupied specially, and are therefore subject to special conditions; and the theoretical standard within theory must surely be absolute. We have no right to listen to morality when it rushes in blindly. “ Act so,” urges morality, that is “ be so or be dissatisfied.” But if I am dissatisfied, still apparently I may be none the less real. “ Act so,” replies speculation, that is, “ think so or be dissatisfied; and if you do not think so, what you think is certainly not real.” And these two

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commands do not seem to be directly connected. If I am theoretically not satisfied, then what appears must in reality be otherwise; but, if I am dissatisfied practically, the same conclusion does not hold. Thus the two satisfactions are not the same, nor does there appear to be a straight way from the one to the other. Or consider again the same question from a different side. Morality seemed anxious to dictate to metaphysics, but is it prepared to accept a corresponding dictation? If it were to hear that the real world is quite other than its ideal, and if it were unable theoretically to shake this result, would morality acquiesce? Would it not, on the other hand, regardless of this, still maintain its own ground? Facts may be as you say, but none the less they should not be so, and something else ought to be. Morality, I think, would take this line, and, if so, it should accept a like attitude in theory. It must not dictate as to what facts are, while it refuses to admit dictation as to what they should be. Certainly, to any one who believes in the unity of our nature, a one-sided satisfaction will remain incredible. And such a consideration to my mind carries very great weight. But to stand on one side of our nature, and to argue from that directly to the other side, seems illegitimate. I will not here ask how far morality is consistent with itself in demanding complete harmony (Chapter xxv.). What seems clear is that, in wishing to dictate to mere theory, it is abandoning its own position and is courting foreign occupation. And it is misled mainly by a failure to observe essential distinctions. "Be so" does not mean always "think so," and "think so," in its main signification, certainly does not mean "be so." Their difference is the difference between "you ought" and "it is"—and I can see no direct road from the one to the other. If a theory could be made by the will, that would have to satisfy the will, and, if it did not, it would be false. But since metaphysics is mere theory, and since theory from its nature must be made by the intellect, it is here the intellect alone which has to be satisfied. Doubtless a conclusion which fails to content all the sides of my nature leaves me dissatisfied. But I see no direct way of passing from "this does not satisfy my nature" to "therefore it is false." For false is the same as theoretically untenable, and we are supposing a case where mere theory has been satisfied, and where the result has in consequence been taken as true. And, so far as I see, we must admit that,

if the intellect is contented, the question is settled. For we may feel as we please about the intellectual conclusion, but we cannot, on such external ground, protest that it is false. Hence if we understand by perfection a state of harmony with pleasure, there is no direct way of showing that reality is perfect. For, so far as the intellectual standard at present seems to go, we might have harmony with pain and with partial dissatisfaction. But I think the case is much altered when we consider it otherwise, and when we ask if on another ground such harmony is possible. The intellect is not to be dictated to; that conclusion is irrefragable. But is it certain, on the other hand, that the mere intellect can be self-satisfied, if other elements of our nature remain not contented? Or must we not think rather that indirectly any partial discontent will bring unrest and imperfection into the intellect itself? If this is so, then to suppose any imperfection in the Absolute is inadmissible.

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## 2.6 KEY WORDS

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**Reality:** Reality is the sum or aggregate of all that is real or existent, as opposed to that which is only imaginary. The term is also used to refer to the ontological status of things, indicating their existence. In physical terms, reality is the totality of the universe, known and unknown

**Appearance:** the way that someone or something looks.

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## 2.7 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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1. Discuss about the Appearance and reality.
2. How do you know about the Appearance: Primary and Secondary Qualities?

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## 2.8 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## 2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to Check your Progress 1

1. I have been obliged to speak of philosophy as a satisfaction of what may be called the mystical side of our nature a satisfaction which, by certain persons, cannot be as well procured otherwise. And I may have given the impression that I take the metaphysician to be initiated into something far higher than what the common herd possesses. Such a doctrine would rest on a most deplorable error, the superstition that the mere intellect is the highest side of our nature, and the false idea that in the intellectual world work done on higher subjects is for that reason higher work. Certainly the life of one man, in comparison with that of another, may be fuller of the Divine, or, again, may realize it with an intenser consciousness; but there is no calling or pursuit which is a private road to the Deity. And assuredly the way through speculation upon ultimate truths, though distinct and legitimate, is not superior to others. There is no sin, however prone to it the philosopher may be, which philosophy can justify so little as spiritual pride.
2. This whole contains diversity, and, on the other hand, is not parted by relations. Such an experience, we must admit, is most imperfect and unstable, and its inconsistencies lead us at once to transcend it. Indeed, we hardly possess it as more than that which we are in the act of losing. But it serves to suggest to us the general idea of a total



experience, where will and thought and feeling may all once more be one. Further, this same unity, felt below distinctions, shows itself later in a kind of hostility against them. We find it in the efforts made both by theory and practice, each to complete itself and so to pass into the other. And, again, the relational form, as we saw, pointed everywhere to a unity. It implies a substantial totality beyond relations and above them, a whole endeavouring without success to realise itself in their detail. Further, the ideas of goodness, and of the beautiful, suggest in different ways the same result. They more or less involve the experience of a whole beyond relations though full of diversity. Now, if we gather (as we can) such considerations into one, they will assuredly supply us with a positive idea. We gain from them the knowledge of a unity which transcends and yet contains every manifold appearance. They supply not an experience but an abstract idea, an idea which we make by uniting given elements. And the mode of union, once more in the abstract, is actually given. Thus we know what is meant by an experience, which embraces all divisions, and yet somehow possesses the direct nature of feeling. We can form the general idea of an absolute experience in which phenomenal distinctions are merged, a whole become immediate at a higher stage without losing any richness. Our complete inability to understand this concrete unity in detail is no good ground for our declining to entertain it. Such a ground would be irrational, and its principle could hardly everywhere be adhered to. But if we can realise at all the general features of the Absolute, if we can see that somehow they come together in a way known vaguely and in the abstract, our result is certain. Our conclusion, so far as it goes, is real knowledge of the Absolute, positive knowledge built on experience, and inevitable when we try to think consistently. We shall realise its nature more clearly when we have confronted it with a series of objections and difficulties. If our result will hold against them all, we shall be able to urge that in reason we are bound to think it true.

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## **UNIT 3: BRIEF HISTORY OF WESTERN METAPHYSICS**

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### **STRUCTURE**

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Greek Metaphysics
- 3.3 Medieval Metaphysics
- 3.4 Modern Metaphysics
- 3.5 Contemporary Metaphysics
- 3.6 Let us sum up
- 3.7 Key Words
- 3.8 Questions for Review
- 3.9 Suggested readings and references
- 3.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

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### **3.0 OBJECTIVES**

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The main objective of this unit is to acquire an in-depth knowledge of the history of western metaphysics. Without getting a historical knowledge of metaphysics, one cannot hope to get a real grasp of the metaphysical problems and the solutions offered by different philosophers. All great philosophers have been metaphysicians; they have dealt with the problem of reality. In the present unit, we will deal with the metaphysical systems in Greek, Medieval, Modern and Contemporary western philosophy. This is not a mere summary of different systems; rather it aims at showing the inter-connections among different metaphysical systems.

Thus by learning this unit the students should be able:

- to acquire an in-depth knowledge of metaphysics of the important metaphysicians in western philosophy.

- to see how the metaphysics of each successive thinker functions as a criticism/modification of previous thinkers.
- to relate metaphysics with other branches of philosophy.

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## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Traditionally, metaphysics is defined as the science of being as being, or of reality as such. The western metaphysics has a historical character in so far as the metaphysical reflection of different philosophers unfolds historically, very much like events in human history. Indeed, the thought of each successive thinker functions as a critique or modification of previous thinkers. The present survey attempts to clarify this intimate link among the metaphysical systems of different thinkers. Being the foundational discipline in philosophy, metaphysics is related to other branches of philosophy, especially epistemology--the theory of knowledge. Traditionally, epistemology was considered as the first part of metaphysics. We may say that as metaphysics is, so is epistemology, and also vice versa. Moreover, metaphysics is related to cosmology, philosophical anthropology, natural theology; for, the nature of ultimate reality determines material objects, man and God. Finally, it is also related to ethics in so far as morality is determined by the nature of man, which in turn is dependent on the interpretation of ultimate reality. We will deal with other branches of philosophy only in so far as they are needed to clarify the relation among the metaphysical reflections of different philosophers.

It is not easy to say what metaphysics is. Ancient and Medieval philosophers might have said that metaphysics was, like chemistry or astrology, to be defined by its subject-matter: metaphysics was the “science” that studied “being as such” or “the first causes of things” or “things that do not change”. It is no longer possible to define metaphysics that way, for two reasons. First, a philosopher who denied the existence of those things that had once been seen as constituting the subject-matter of metaphysics—first causes or unchanging things—would now be considered to be making thereby a metaphysical assertion.

Second, there are many philosophical problems that are now considered to be metaphysical problems (or at least partly metaphysical problems) that are in no way related to first causes or unchanging things—the problem of free will, for example, or the problem of the mental and the physical.

The first three sections of this entry examine a broad selection of problems considered to be metaphysical and discuss ways in which the purview of metaphysics has expanded over time. We shall see that the central problems of metaphysics were significantly more unified in the Ancient and Medieval eras. Which raises a question—is there any common feature that unites the problems of contemporary metaphysics? The final two sections discuss some recent theories of the nature and methodology of metaphysics. We will also consider arguments that metaphysics, however defined, is an impossible enterprise.

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## 3.2 GREEK METAPHYSICS

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### Pre-Socratic Metaphysics

We find nascent metaphysics even in Thales' philosophy, the first western philosopher, who held that everything can be explained in terms of water. Anaximander criticized this position, and posited the 'infinite' as ultimate reality; and Anaximenes in his turn differed from Anaximander, affirming 'air' as ultimate. Pythagoras, being a mathematician, and impressed by the harmony of nature, taught that numbers constitute the essence of reality. It was Heraclitus who for the first time in western philosophy proclaimed becoming or change, as more fundamental than permanence. According to him, everything that exists, including man, exists because it is in a process of continuous change. Only becoming or change is real, and being or permanence is mere illusion. Not only do things change from moment to moment; even in one and the same moment they are, and are not, the same. It is not merely that a thing first is, and then a moment later, is not; it is both, is and is not at the same time. The at-onceness of 'is' and 'is not' is the

meaning of becoming. To signalize the reality of incessant change, Heraclitus chose as his first principle the most mobile substance he knew, namely, fire. Fire is not an abiding substratum in all change, but the denial of all substances. It is an exact parallel of the metaphysical principle of becoming. Parmenides challenged Heraclitus' teaching that everything changes. How can a thing, both be and not be at the same time? To say that it can, is to say that something is, and is not, which is a contradiction. Parmenides denies becoming and affirms being. Hence from being only being can come, and nothing can become something else; whatever is, always has been, and always will be; everything remains what it is. Therefore there can be only one eternal, unchangeable being. Empedocles, Anaxagoras and Democritus tried to reconcile the problem of permanence and change, holding that there are some permanent elements in reality, and also some other elements which are the causes of all changes.

### **The Sophists and Socrates**

The Sophists and Socrates were mainly concerned with the problem of knowledge. Because the previous thinkers held different opinions regarding the nature of ultimate reality, the Sophists came to the conclusion that it is impossible to attain true knowledge about reality. Hence metaphysics is impossible. Since they were unable to know reality, there cannot be a morality based on the nature of reality; ethics was merely conventional. Socrates attempted to confront the Sophists' problem of knowledge head on. He demonstrated that knowledge through concepts is attainable making use of dialectical method. Since knowledge is attainable, there is also the knowledge of morality; according to him knowledge is virtue.

### **Plato**

Plato starts his metaphysics with Socratic concepts. Now, the concepts have no validity unless there are realities corresponding to them. Plato was interested in mathematics, especially geometry. Since he did not find

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perfect geometrical figures such as circles, squares, triangles, etc., in this world corresponding to their concepts in human mind, Plato concluded that these exist in a transcendent, ideal world. Similarly, corresponding to all ideas in the mind, there exist essences or forms in the ideal world--the highest form, being the idea of the Good. Now these forms can be known only by rational mind. Compared to the ideal world, the world of experience is mere shadow. Matter is evil. Senses which perceive this world are not dependable sources of knowledge. To explain the reality of man, Plato invented the myth of the pre-existence of human soul which, inhabiting a star, contemplated the forms of the ideal world, and fell due to desire for this world. Thus rational knowledge is innate. The soul is imprisoned in matter; matter being evil, human body too is evil. Hence moral action consists in suppressing the body, and liberating the soul for the contemplation of forms. Plato's philosophy ended up in a dualism between the world of experience and ideal world.

### **Aristotle**

Aristotle's metaphysics starts with the rejection of Plato's ideal world of forms. For him, forms do not exist in a transcendent world, but they exist in the things of the world of experience. In his view, both senses and intellect co-operate in the acquisition of knowledge—universal ideas--through the process of abstraction. Corresponding to the universal ideas in our minds, there exist essences in things. Aristotle drew up ten categories such as substance and nine accidents, classifying all realities according their modes of existence. The substances of natural bodies, including man, are constituted out of matter and form; and these possess accidents such as quantity, quality, etc. Motion is explained as transition from potency to act. Reflection upon the fact of motion in this world led Aristotle to conclude that there exists an unmoved mover—God; God is thought-thinking-thought. This prime mover is not the creator or efficient cause of the world, nor does he know the world, because God has no ideas in his mind. For, Aristotle had already rejected Plato's world of ideas. God moves the world only as a final cause. Aristotelian

metaphysics ended up in a dualism between the uncreated world and uncreated God.

### **Neo-Platonism**

Neo-Platonism of Plotinus is a monistic synthesis of Platonism. In his metaphysics, the One--the ultimate reality--corresponds to the form of the Good in Plato's metaphysics. The world of nous is the ideal world, and there is the world-soul and matter. Other realities emanate from the One, each subsequent stage proceeding from the one which is just previous to it. Just as Plotinus' metaphysics deals with the emanation from the One to matter, so his moral philosophy is concerned with the reverse process or the return of man to God by means of purification from matter. Such purification is marked by three stages: practical, contemplative and ecstatic.

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## **3.3 MEDIEVAL METAPHYSICS**

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### **Augustine**

Medieval metaphysics marks the synthesis of the metaphysics of Plato and of Aristotle with Christian faith. The great philosophers, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, attempted to Christianize Plato and Aristotle. Augustinian metaphysics is almost completely Platonic except for the fact that he brings in God with the doctrine of exemplarism. There are exemplars—forms of Plato's ideal world—in the mind of God according to which he created the world. Universal ideas are obtained through divine illumination.

### **Thomas Aquinas**

Though St. Thomas is known to be an Aristotelian, at the heart of his metaphysics is the Platonic doctrine of ideas; he borrowed from St. Augustine exemplarism--the doctrine that there are ideas in the mind of God according to which he created the world. St. Thomas' contribution to Aristotelian metaphysics is his theory of essence and existence. All

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created beings are constituted of essence and existence. Different members of the same species possess similar essences; for example, Peter and Paul, have similar essences or human natures. In material things, essence itself is composed of matter and form. St. Thomas makes the distinction between contingent beings and necessary being; essence and existence are distinct in contingent beings, whereas in necessary being—God—they are identical; that is, God is existence itself. The principle of individuation—that which makes an individual thing to be that thing different from another thing—is matter limited by quantity. In the acquisition of knowledge, St. Thomas gives a subordinate role to sense image in so far as abstraction of universal ideas is the work of agent intellect. Corresponding to these ideas there exist essences in things. The intellect knows individual things only indirectly through sense image, since the direct object of intellect is the universal essences in things. God is both the efficient and final cause of the universe. God created the world according to the ideas in his mind. St. Thomas accorded primacy to intellect over will in God and also in man. In creating this world, God's will was guided by the intellect; hence the world is rational. In ethics, St. Thomas held that moral laws are based on human nature with their transcendent foundation in the ideas in divine mind. In his thought, St. Thomas affirms the threefold existence of the universals: in the mind of man and of God as concepts, and in things as essences. There is no dualism in the metaphysics of St. Thomas.

### **John Duns Scotus**

With Duns Scotus started the decline of medieval philosophy. Though he followed St. Thomas on important metaphysical doctrines, he differed from him on crucial points. Though universal ideas are acquired through abstraction, Scotus gave an important role to sense image in this process, whereas St. Thomas accorded primacy to intellect. The latter taught that universal essence is the direct object of the intellect, and so the intellect knows the individual only indirectly. But Scotus held that the intellect knows also the individual thing directly since the higher faculty understands also what the lower faculties—senses—know. Moreover for



him, the principle of individuation is thisness—haecceitas. Regarding the doctrine of universal essences, St. Thomas would hold that if X and Y are two men, their two essences or natures are similar. Though Scotus spoke of a common human nature, he would not mean that the actual nature of X is similar to the actual nature of Y. Further, he held voluntarism—primacy of the will—both in man and in God. Thus in creating the world, God assigned to everything its own nature: to fire that of heating, to water that of being cold, and so on. He could have created a universe ruled by laws opposite to those which presently govern it. Because all things are dependent on the will of God, nothing in the universe is rational. Hence moral laws are not rational. God has prescribed them. Therefore, he could have made a society in which murder and polygamy would not be wrong. With regard to the Decalogue, the first three commandments regarding God are necessary since they follow from God’s love of himself. In effect, all these doctrines imply a denial of ideas in the mind of God--the foundation of rationality in the universe--the rejection of universal ideas and essences, and the affirmation of the individual.

**Check Your Progress 1**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

- 1) Compare the metaphysics of Plato and that of Aristotle.

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- 2) What are the differences between the metaphysics of Aristotle and that of St. Thomas Aquinas?

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### 3.4 MODERN METAPHYSICS

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Greek and Medieval philosophy started philosophizing with object; and this experiment came to an end with the skepticism of Occam. Both rationalism and empiricism in modern philosophy start philosophy with subject; that is, what is given in the subject: rationalism with innate ideas, and empiricism with sense impressions.

#### René Descartes

Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz are the rationalist philosophers in modern philosophy. Descartes' philosophical background was provided by the skepticism of Occam. Agreeing with the skeptical doctrine, he proceeded to doubt everything; but doubting itself is thinking, and if he is thinking, Descartes concluded, he exists: Cogito ergo sum. He is certain about the existence of self. Now, the self finds in itself many ideas—the innate ideas. One of the ideas is that of God. Since the idea of God is the idea of a perfect Being, God must have placed it in the self, and hence God exists. There are also ideas about the external world, and we have a belief that such a world exists. God who is truthful would not give us this belief if such a world did not exist. After having established the existence of self, God and world, Descartes proceeds to build up his metaphysical system. He proposes his metaphysical categories-- substance, attributes and modes- -in the place of the ten categories of Aristotle. Substance is a reality which so exists that it needs no other reality to exist. So defined, there can be only one substance, namely, God; but Descartes admits relative substances, such as matter and mind. The essential characteristic property of substance is called attribute.

Thought is the principal attribute of mind, and extension that of body. But there are also modes, such as particular thoughts in mind, which are separable, in the sense that mind can exist without them. Matter and mind being entirely different, Cartesian metaphysics ends up in dualism.

### **Benedict Spinoza**

Taking Descartes' definition of substance strictly, Spinoza builds up a deductive system of metaphysics. Given this definition, there can be only one substance, namely, God. Mind and matter are the attributes of God so that Cartesian dualism is transformed into pantheistic monism. Spinoza accepts Descartes' concepts of attributes and modes. For him, God has infinite number of attributes of which we know only mind and matter. There are also infinite modes and finite modes.

### **Gottfried Leibniz**

According to Leibniz, the ultimate substance is monad which is the center of force. He got the notion of monad from a synthesis of the concepts of physical atom and mathematical point. In physics, atom is the smallest unit which is real, but divisible. But in mathematics, a point is indivisible, but not a real entity. Neither atom nor mathematical point can be substance because substance must be real as well as indivisible; and it should have also the element of motion. Monad is such a real and indivisible substance, as center of force. They are the metaphysical units of all living and non-living objects, including God.

### **John Locke**

Empiricism was another experiment at philosophizing which started with subject—with sense impressions in subject. Locke, Berkeley and Hume are the empiricist philosophers. According to Locke, we have no innate ideas as held by rationalists; all our knowledge come from experience—sense impressions. In order to reach the world of objects from sense impressions, he makes use of the principle of causality. External objects

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are the causes of impressions in us. Locke makes a distinction between primary and secondary qualities of material objects; primary qualities such as extension, figure and so on, are objective, whereas secondary qualities such as colour, smell, taste, etc., are subjective. Though as an empiricist, he cannot affirm metaphysical realities, he holds that there are substances such as matter and mind. A body is a substance supporting primary qualities such as extension and impenetrability. There are spiritual substances or souls with the qualities of thinking and willing. There is also pure spirit, namely, God.

### **George Berkeley**

George Berkeley agrees with Locke that sense impressions are the objects of our knowledge. But he rejects the distinction between primary (objective) and secondary (subjective) qualities; according to him, even primary qualities are subjective, since primary and secondary qualities cannot be separated. Apart from primary and secondary qualities, there is no material substance holding together these qualities, as held by Locke. For, if this substance is separate from qualities, it is unknowable, and so is meaningless. But if it is connected with qualities, it exists only when perceived. Hence if primary and secondary qualities are subjective, and if there is no material substance apart from these qualities, then the so-called material world does not exist objectively. Its reality consists in its being perceived by the subject; *esse est percipi*: to be is to be perceived. More precisely, to be is to be perceived--as impressions; or to be is to be a perceiver—as mind. Minds or spirits, and their perceptions, are all that exist. The objects of experience are not material things; they are perceptions in our minds.

### David Hume

David Hume drew the logical conclusion of empiricism. If experience is the source of knowledge, metaphysics which claims to attain knowledge of reality beyond experience is impossible. Hence he rejects the metaphysical concepts of substance and causality. For Hume, substance

is a meaningless concept. We think of extension, figure, colour, sound, and other properties of bodies, as qualities which cannot exist by themselves. Imagination feigns something unknown and invisible—substance—which is unchangeable despite the change of different qualities. This is a fiction. Moreover, there is no metaphysical concept of causality. Our knowledge of the relation between cause and effect is based on experience. Sense impressions are associated with one another, and they succeed one another with a certain constancy.

### Immanuel Kant

Hume's skepticism is said to have aroused Kant 'from his dogmatic slumber.' With his Copernican revolution in philosophy, the turn to the subject that started with Descartes reached its climax. Most of the philosophers who came after Kant, even contemporary philosophers, merely extended Copernican revolution in different areas of thought. Most of the thinkers till Kant's time held that for knowledge to be true, it must conform to the object. Kant literally reversed this doctrine—and this is the Copernican revolution—and maintained that it is the 'object' that is to be conformed to the 'subject,' or rather to the conditions of cognition. The cognitive structure of 'mind' is viewed as the source of certain conditions to which the 'object' must conform in order to constitute knowledge. This does not mean that there is an 'object' waiting to be conformed to 'mind,' nor a 'mind' to which the 'object' is conformed. Rather an object is that which is conformed to certain a priori cognitive conditions.

Kant investigates these a priori conditions of knowledge employing transcendental method. These conditions are a priori forms of space and time of sensibility, and twelve categories of understanding; these are not obtained from experience of objects, but rather they are presupposed in all experience. On the level of sensibility, sense impressions are organized by the forms of space and time. But in order to constitute rational knowledge, there must be a higher synthesis employing twelve categories of understanding. Two such categories are substance and

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causality. For example, in order to make the causal judgment that stone breaks window glass, the experiences of a stone coming into contact with glass and immediately afterwards the continuous pane of glass being replaced by falling fragments are subsumed under the category of causality.

Now, the ultimate condition of the possibility of knowledge, according to Kant, is the transcendental 'I' or the transcendental unity of apperception. This unity is not derived from experience, but is a necessary presupposition of the synthesis of the manifold sense data into an intelligible whole. The objects conformed to a priori forms of space and time, and twelve categories of understanding are called phenomena. Noumena or things-in-themselves are objects existing independently of knowing subject. We know only phenomena, the product of organization of experience by means of forms and categories. What things are in themselves— noumena--what is it that causes sensations in us, we do not know. Hence science and mathematics dealing with phenomena are possible, but metaphysics dealing with noumena such as world, man and God, is impossible. Just as objects are to be conformed to a priori forms and categories in order to constitute knowledge, so human acts are to be conformed to the form of will, which is called categorical imperative; it is the command to do duty for its own sake. Moral act is good when it is done solely from respect for duty regardless of consequences. It is this a priori form of will that determines empirical elements, namely, human actions, and makes them moral. Similarly, an object is judged to be beautiful when it is conformed to the faculty of taste. The sense of beauty is not built up by repeated experiences of beautiful objects. In experience I apprehend the object only in its sensible qualities and its spatio-temporal dimensions. I must have the form of beauty which I attribute to the object; or else even the simplest experience of the beautiful will be impossible. Kantian philosophy ends up in the dualism between phenomena and noumena.

German Idealism

German idealists--Fichte, Schelling and Hegel--looked upon themselves as the philosophical successors of Kant. That metaphysical idealism developed out of the system of a thinker whose name is associated with skepticism about metaphysical knowledge is one of the strangest developments in the history of western metaphysics. The starting point of German idealism is Kantian notion of thing-in-itself or noumena. Idealists proceeded to eliminate thing-in-itself in order to complete Kant's project. Given Kant's premises, there was no room for an unknowable entity supposedly independent of mind. Kantian philosophy had to be transformed into a consistent idealism; this meant that noumena had to be regarded as products of thought, as in the case of phenomena.

#### Johann Fichte and Friedrich Schelling

For Fichte, the Absolute as thought is the ultimate reality, and nature is the projection of the Absolute. Individual egos and material things are its manifestations. The Absolute cannot become conscious of itself unless it is opposed by non-ego or nature which it projects. The Absolute ego becomes conscious of itself in this act of creation. Schelling accepts Fichte's concept of Absolute ego as ultimate reality, but differs from his concept of nature. Schelling rejects the view that nature is the projection of the Absolute. According to him, the Absolute must be conceived as the indeterminate identity of spirit and nature. Production of nature is due to the fact that the pole of nature prevails over the pole of the spirit through the unconscious action of the Absolute. Schelling conceives nature and mind as progressive stages in the evolution of the Absolute that expresses itself in inorganic and organic realms, in individual life and social life, in history, science and art. The Absolute reaches its highest goal--selfconsciousness and freedom--in man. It is in man that the original identity of nature and spirit is manifested through aesthetic intuition. The artist imitates the creative action of the Absolute and becomes conscious of its activity. In artistic creation, the Absolute becomes conscious of its own creative force.

Georg Hegel

Hegel accepted Fichte's insight that the Absolute ego is the metaphysical principle creative of all reality, and Schelling's intuition that this Absolute is not static, but a dynamic process which evolves. Reality—the Absolute Spirit—for Hegel, is a dynamic process of evolution in which something that is undifferentiated differentiates itself and assumes many contradictory forms until all the potentialities are realized, and all contradictions reconciled. Every stage in the process contains all the preceding stages and foreshadows all the future ones. Reality is full of contradictions and negations. For example, the plant germinates, flowers, withers and dies. In understanding these processes, we must predicate each of these contradictions, and show how they are reconciled and preserved in the whole. They must be understood as parts of an organic system. The movement of the Absolute manifesting itself in nature and mind in its journey towards self-consciousness is called dialectical movement, with its three moments of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. It cannot become conscious without a world, and it achieves full selfconsciousness in the minds of human beings. In rational thought, the Absolute becomes fully conscious of itself. Metaphysics expresses the content of the Absolute through the proportionate medium of rational thought. The Absolute contemplates itself as objective existence.

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### **3.5 CONTEMPORARY METAPHYSICS**

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Edmund Husserl

In Husserl's phenomenology, we find another variety of idealistic metaphysics along Kantian lines. According to Husserl, Kant was not radical enough. He discovered the region of meaning conferring, object constituting subjectivity—the transcendental I—but did not reach the pure ego which constitutes not only scientific objects—the phenomena—but also all varieties of objects and sense of the world. By taking a more radical transcendental turn, Husserl was able to reach the pure subjectivity, and show how the world of everyday experience is its



accomplishment. He could accomplish with respect everyday world what Kant could achieve regarding the world of science. He was able to account for those transcendental structures of conscious activity that are presupposed by our capacity to constitute the sense of the world of experience. Husserl makes use of the methods of epoché—bracketing the world of existence--and eidetic reduction—abstracting from the particular--in order to reach the region of transcendental ego which is the meaning-giving, object constituting subjectivity. For him, the transcendental subjectivity is the source of all meanings of the world and of any worldly facts.

### Martin Heidegger

Heidegger's philosophy of being is yet another experiment at extending the Copernican revolution initiated by Kant, and modified by Husserl. Kant left the dualism between phenomena and noumena; and Husserl's technique of epoché—bracketing the world of existence--in fact separated the world of transcendental subjectivity from the real world. Heidegger proposes to employ phenomenological method without epoché, and to deal with everyday world in view of clarifying the problem of being. According to him, traditional philosophers were 'forgetful' of being. They asked the 'why' question, and ended up with the Supreme Being—God--as the ground all beings. Hence Heidegger calls traditional philosophy 'onto-theology.' He attempts to separate 'onto-' from 'theology,' that is, detach literally ontology from theology, thereby 'destroying' the traditional onto-theological metaphysics. Since traditional philosophy was 'forgetful of being,' Heidegger proposes to ask the question of being anew. He starts this project with the very being who asks this question, namely, man, christened Dasein. Dasein is the transcendental self in relation to being.

According to Heidegger, Aristotle interprets human existence in terms of categories that are alien to man. His system of categories is taken from

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the domain of natural things, the basic category being 'substance.' Heidegger claims that the notion of substance does not fit Dasein. Instead, he analyzes Dasein on the basis of its own fundamental experience. Traditional categories taken from nature are replaced by existentials--the concepts that describe the being of Dasein. On the basis of such phenomenological description of Dasein, Heidegger inquires into the question of being. Now, Dasein is described as being-in-the-world; and its various dimensions are brought under the key concepts of existentiality, facticity and fallenness. Existentiality is correlated with understanding and projection, facticity with anxiety, and fallenness with being-amidst and concern with things. And the totality of Dasein's structural whole comprehending existentiality, facticity and fallenness is called care. The significance of existentiality is being-ahead-of-itself, of facticity is being-already-in-the-world, and of fallenness is being-alongside the entities within the world. These are the essential features of Dasein's 'everyday,' inauthentic mode of existence. In order to get an integral vision of human existence, Heidegger proceeds to analyze the phenomenon of death. In anticipating death, man achieves the overarching unity that gathers up all the possibilities of human existence; and Dasein is made painfully aware of its temporality. Thus it is temporality that constitutes primordially the totality of the structure of care, with its dimensions of existentiality, facticity and fallenness. These three dimensions of care receive temporal interpretations in terms of a futural being-ahead (existentiality), a past being-already (facticity), and a present being-amidst (fallenness). Thus Heidegger gives a final interpretation of the basic constitution of Dasein in terms of temporality with its three dimensions of present, past and future—the future given priority. Now what about the question of being and of ground? Traditional metaphysics attempted to ground the irreducible facticity of human's selfhood as well as that of nature on the Absolute or God. But Heidegger accepted the facticity of the self as such; that is to say, he sought to interpret Dasein in terms of its own structure, and the ultimate constitution of Dasein is found to be temporality. Rather than providing a ground outside Dasein, temporality has been recognized as its essential constitution. Thus Dasein is grounded in nothing outside itself. Dasein,

held out into nothing, is beyond all beings, and has in this sense attained ultimate transcendence, the goal of metaphysics.

Alfred North Whitehead

Whitehead's process thought is a neo-realistic metaphysics of becoming. He was opposed to the idea which had dominated metaphysics since the time of Aristotle that every entity consists of a permanent substratum supporting different qualities. Now, if we start with permanence, change can only be an appearance; but if we start with change, we can explain permanence and selfidentity as the repetition of relatively enduring patterns of activity. This is the Whiteheadian strategy. Whitehead interprets reality as an organic process. The word 'process' implies temporal change and interconnected activity. He calls his metaphysics 'the philosophy of organism.' The basic analogy for interpreting the world is organism, which is a highly integrated and dynamic pattern of interdependent events. According to Whitehead, reality is constituted by interrelated events rather than by separate, unchanging substances. For him, transition and activity are more fundamental than permanence and substance. The ultimate constituents of reality are actual entities. These are microcosmic units of process that may be linked to other actual entities in order to form things of everyday experience. An actual entity endures only for an instant—the instant of its becoming; that is, its active process of self-creation out of the elements of perishing past, to become the datum for succeeding generations of actual entities. Thus actual entities are in the process of perpetual becoming and perishing, but as they perish they are taken up into the creative advance of the whole, and are passed on to other actual entities. The universe is a process of perpetual becoming, flux, and change, in which actual entities come to be and pass away. Coupled with this doctrine of flux is the notion of permanence of all things.

While Whitehead rejects an unchanging substrate underlying all change, he does not discard the concept of substrate as such. But this substrate does not exist apart from individual becoming. In order to explain

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permanence, Whitehead brings in the concept of definiteness or form; for there can be no becoming of actual entities, which is not definite or determinate. But becoming itself cannot generate definiteness out of itself. The factors of definiteness whereby the becoming of actual entities acquires determinate character are called 'eternal objects' which are in the primordial nature of God. These forms of definiteness are capable of specifying the character of actual entities. Thus instead of definite things—substances--undergoing change, becoming takes on definite patterns of reality through forms of definiteness. The doctrine of God completes Whitehead's metaphysics of becoming. God has two natures--primordial and consequent. As primordial nature, God is unlimited potentiality. Whitehead ascribes the function of ordering of potentialities to God. In this function God is thought of as an abstract, impersonal principle. As such, he lacks actuality. As unlimited potentiality, God's primordial nature includes eternal objects which account for order in the becoming of actual entities. But the consequent nature of God is subject to the process of actualization in the actual world. As such, God is the ground of novelty as well as of order, presenting new possibilities with open alternatives. He elicits the self-creation of individual entities and thereby allows for novelty as well as structure. God influences the world without determining it. He does not determine the outcome of events nor violate the self-creation of each being. Every entity is the joint product of past causes, divine purposes, and new entity's own self-creation.

### Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

- 1) Explain the transition from Kant's philosophy to German idealism.

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- 2) What are the differences between Kant's synthesis and Husserl's phenomenology?
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### 3.6 LET US SUM UP

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After having made a brief survey of western metaphysics, we find two important characteristics therein. The first concerns the starting point of metaphysics. In general, Greek and medieval metaphysics started with the object, whereas modern and contemporary metaphysics with subject. Second, in western thought, we find metaphysics of permanence and metaphysics of change. The former interprets reality as static permanence, and for the latter reality is dynamic becoming. Most of the western metaphysicians understand reality as static, except Heraclitus, Hegel, Bergson, Whitehead and Heidegger who interpret reality as becoming. Western metaphysics is comprehensive in so far as it deals with most important metaphysical problems. For the student who has a general understanding of western philosophy, the present summary provides a firm grasp of western metaphysics. It is indeed the story of metaphysics in the west.

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### 3.7 KEY WORDS

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**Metaphysics:** As mentioned in the introduction, metaphysics is defined as the science of being as being, or reality as such.

**Subject:** Subject is traditionally interpreted as that which knows, as opposed to object as that which is known.

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### 3.8 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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- 1) Compare the metaphysics of Plato and that of Aristotle.

- 2) What are the differences between the metaphysics of Aristotle and that of St. Thomas Aquinas?
- 3) Explain the transition from Kant's philosophy to German idealism.
- 4) What are the differences between Kant's synthesis and Husserl's phenomenology?

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### **3.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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Answers to Check your progress 1

1. Plato is known as idealist since his metaphysics was concerned about the forms of the ideal world; whereas Aristotle is called a realist since he dealt with the world of our experience. Plato held that corresponding to our concepts, essences or forms exist in a transcendent world. But for Aristotle forms are in the things of this world. For Plato, this world is a shadow; according to Aristotle, this world is real.

2. Though St. Thomas is an Aristotelian, there are crucial differences between both of them. At the heart of his metaphysics is the theory of exemplarism: that there are ideas in the mind of God. This is tantamount to bringing back Plato's ideal world, which Aristotle rejects. Aristotle does not admit creation; God is only the final cause of the universe. For St. Thomas, God is not only the final cause of the universe, but also its efficient cause--creator. Moreover, St. Thomas introduces the doctrine of essence and existence, which Aristotle does not have. According to this theory, created beings are composed of essence and existence. In material things there is a double composition; they are composed of essence and existence, and essence itself is constituted out of matter and form.

### **Answers to Check your progress 2**

1. According to Kant, there is a dualism between phenomena and noumena. The German idealists wanted to eliminate noumena. They attempted to do this by regarding noumena as products of thought. For this, the transcendental I of Kant had to be transformed into the creative ego—the Absolute subject. Kant's work dealt with the activity of transcendental I. The thinking ego is the coordinator of the data of experience; the practical ego is the legislator in morality; the sentimental ego is source of beauty and finality in nature. Still there is the dualism between phenomena and noumena. Now, the activity of the ego is transcendental. Hence German idealists extended the activity of the ego beyond truth, morality and beauty to reality itself—noumena. Thus they

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transformed the transcendental I of Kant into the absolute subject which creates all reality.

2. Husserl's phenomenology is an extension of Kant's Copernican revolution. According to Kant, the objects of knowledge are to be conformed to the cognitive conditions in the subject. He discovered the region of meaning conferring subjectivity—the transcendental I. But he was mainly concerned with the possibility of science and scientific objects-- phenomena. In his phenomenology, Husserl attempted to reach the transcendental subjectivity which confers meaning, and constitutes not only scientific objects, but also all objects of everyday experience. Thus Husserl was more radical than Kant. Moreover, unlike Kant, Husserl does not accept noumenon or thing-in-itself. For him, the only world that is real for us is the world of phenomena. He does not accept thing-in-itself, because it would imply that what actually appears in experience is not the real thing; that the phenomenal object is merely a substitute for something else beyond experience.



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# UNIT 4: BEING, BECOMING: ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE

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## STRUCTURE

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Being As Such, First Causes, Unchanging Things
- 4.3 Categories of Being and Universals
- 4.4 Essence and Existence
- 4.5 Let us sum up
- 4.6 Key Words
- 4.7 Questions for Review
- 4.8 Suggested readings and references
- 4.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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In philosophy, essence is the property or set of properties that make an entity or substance what it fundamentally is, and which it has by necessity, and without which it loses its identity. Essence is contrasted with accident: a property that the entity or substance has contingently, without which the substance can still retain its identity. The concept originates rigorously with Aristotle (although it can also be found in Plato), who used the Greek expression *to ti ên einai* (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, literally meaning "the what it was to be" and corresponding to the scholastic term *quiddity*) or sometimes the shorter phrase *to ti esti* (τὸ τί ἐστι, literally meaning "the what it is" and corresponding to the scholastic term *haecceity*) for the same idea. This phrase presented such difficulties for its Latin translators that they coined the word *essentia* (English "essence") to represent the whole expression. For Aristotle and his scholastic followers, the notion of essence is closely linked to that of definition (*ὁρισμός* *horismos*).

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In the history of western thought, essence has often served as a vehicle for doctrines that tend to individuate different forms of existence as well as different identity conditions for objects and properties; in this logical meaning, the concept has given a strong theoretical and common-sense basis to the whole family of logical theories based on the "possible worlds" analogy set up by Leibniz and developed in the intensional logic from Carnap to Kripke, which was later challenged by "extensionalist" philosophers such as Quine.

After this unit we can able to know:

- Being As Such, First Causes, Unchanging Things
- Categories of Being and Universals
- Essence and Existence

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## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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The proposition that existence precedes essence (French: *l'existence précède l'essence*) is a central claim of existentialism, which reverses the traditional philosophical view that the essence (the nature) of a thing is more fundamental and immutable than its existence (the mere fact of its being). To existentialists, human beings—through their consciousness—create their own values and determine a meaning for their life because the human being does not possess any inherent identity or value. That identity or value must be created by the individual. By posing the acts that constitute them, they make their existence more significant.

The idea can be found in the works of philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in the 19th century, but was explicitly formulated by philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in the 20th century. The three-word formula originated in his 1945 lecture "Existentialism Is a Humanism", though antecedent notions can be found in Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

The Sartrean claim is best understood in contrast to the scholastic thesis that essence precedes existence, i.e. a typical claim for this traditional

thesis would be a human is essentially selfish, or that they are a rational being.

To Sartre, "existence precedes essence" means that a personality is not built over a previously designed model or a precise purpose, because it is the human being who chooses to engage in such enterprise. While not denying the constraining conditions of human existence, he answers to Spinoza who affirmed that people are determined by what surrounds them. Therefore, to Sartre an oppressive situation is not intolerable in itself, but once regarded as such by those who feel oppressed the situation becomes intolerable. So by projecting my intentions onto my present condition, "It is I who freely transform it into action". When he said that "the world is a mirror of my freedom", he meant that the world obliged me to react, to overtake myself. It is this overtaking of a present constraining situation by a project to come that Sartre names transcendence. He added that "we are condemned to be free".

When it is said that people define themselves, it is often perceived as stating that they can "wish" to be something – anything, a bird, for instance – and then be it. According to Sartre's account, however, this would be a kind of bad faith. What is meant by the statement is that people are (1) defined only insofar as they act and (2) that they are responsible for their actions. To clarify, it can be said that a person who acts cruelly towards other people is, by that act, defined as a cruel person and in that same instance, they (as opposed to their genes, for instance) are defined as being responsible for being this cruel person. Of course, the more positive therapeutic aspect of this is also implied: You can choose to act in a different way, and to be a good person instead of a cruel person. Here it is also clear that since people can choose to be either cruel or good, they are, in fact, neither of these things essentially.

To claim that existence precedes essence is to assert that there is no such predetermined essence to be found in humans, and that an individual's essence is defined by the individual through how that individual creates and lives his or her life. As Sartre puts it in his Existentialism is a

Humanism: "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards".

Existentialism tends to focus on the question of human existence and the conditions of this existence. What is meant by existence is the concrete life of each individual, and their concrete ways of being in the world. Even though this concrete individual existence must be the primary source of information in the study of people, certain conditions are commonly held to be "endemic" to human existence. These conditions are usually in some way related to the inherent meaninglessness or absurdity of the earth and its apparent contrast with our pre-reflexive lived lives which normally present themselves to us as meaningful. A central theme is that since the world "in-itself" is absurd, that is, not "fair", then a meaningful life can at any point suddenly lose all its meaning. The reasons why this happens are many, ranging from a tragedy that "tears a person's world apart", to the results of an honest inquiry into one's own existence. Such an encounter can make a person mentally unstable, and avoiding such instability by making people aware of their condition and ready to handle it is one of the central themes of existentialism. Albert Camus, for instance, famously claimed in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* that "there is only one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide".

Aside from these "psychological" issues, it is also claimed that these encounters with the absurd are where we are most in touch with our condition as humans. Such an encounter cannot be without philosophical significance, and existentialist philosophers derive many metaphysical theories from these encounters. These are often related to the self, consciousness and freedom as well as the nature of meaning.

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## **4.2 BEING AS SUCH, FIRST CAUSES, UNCHANGING THINGS**

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If metaphysics now considers a wider range of problems than those studied in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, those original problems continue to belong to its subject-matter. For instance, the topic of "being as such"

(and “existence as such”, if existence is something other than being) is one of the matters that belong to metaphysics on any conception of metaphysics. The following theses are all paradigmatically metaphysical:

“Being is; not-being is not” [Parmenides];

“Essence precedes existence” [Avicenna, paraphrased];

“Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone” [St Anselm, paraphrased];

“Existence is a perfection” [Descartes, paraphrased];

“Being is a logical, not a real predicate” [Kant, paraphrased];

“Being is the most barren and abstract of all categories” [Hegel, paraphrased];

“Affirmation of existence is in fact nothing but denial of the number zero” [Frege];

“Universals do not exist but rather subsist or have being” [Russell, paraphrased];

“To be is to be the value of a bound variable” [Quine].

It seems reasonable, moreover, to say that investigations into non-being belong to the topic “being as such” and thus belong to metaphysics. (This did not seem reasonable to Meinong, who wished to confine the subject-matter of metaphysics to “the actual” and who therefore did not regard his Theory of Objects as a metaphysical theory. According to the conception of metaphysics adopted in this article, however, his thesis [paraphrased] “Predication is independent of being” is paradigmatically metaphysical.)

The topics “the first causes of things” and “unchanging things”—have continued to interest metaphysicians, though they are not now seen as having any important connection with the topic “being as such”. The first three of Aquinas's Five Ways are metaphysical arguments on any conception of metaphysics. Additionally the thesis that there are no first causes and the thesis that there are no things that do not change count as metaphysical theses, for in the current conception of metaphysics, the denial of a metaphysical thesis is a metaphysical thesis. No post-Medieval philosopher would say anything like this:

I study the first causes of things, and am therefore a metaphysician. My colleague Dr McZed denies that there are any first causes and is therefore not a metaphysician; she is rather, an anti-metaphysician. In her view, metaphysics is a science with a non-existent subject-matter, like astrology.

This feature of the contemporary conception of metaphysics is nicely illustrated by a statement of Sartre's:

I do not think myself any less a metaphysician in denying the existence of God than Leibniz was in affirming it. (1949: 139)

An anti-metaphysician in the contemporary sense is not a philosopher who denies that there are objects of the sorts that an earlier philosopher might have said formed the subject-matter of metaphysics (first causes, things that do not change, universals, substances, ...), but rather a philosopher who denies the legitimacy of the question whether there are objects of those sorts.

The three original topics—the nature of being; the first causes of things; things that do not change—remained topics of investigation by metaphysicians after Aristotle. Another topic occupies an intermediate position between Aristotle and his successors. We may call this topic

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### **4.3 CATEGORIES OF BEING AND UNIVERSALS**

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We human beings sort things into various classes. And we often suppose that the classes into which we sort things enjoy a kind of internal unity. In this respect they differ from sets in the strict sense of the word. (And no doubt in others. It would seem, for example, that we think of the classes we sort things into—biological species, say—as comprising different members at different times.) The classes into which we sort things are in most cases “natural” classes, classes whose membership is in some important sense uniform—“kinds”. We shall not attempt an

account or definition of ‘natural class’ here. Examples must suffice. There are certainly sets whose members do not make up natural classes: a set that contains all dogs but one, and a set that contains all dogs and exactly one cat do not correspond to natural classes in anyone's view. And it is tempting to suppose that there is a sense of “natural” in which dogs make up a natural class, to suppose that in dividing the world into dogs and non-dogs, we “cut nature at the joints”. It is, however, a respectable philosophical thesis that the idea of a natural class cannot survive philosophical scrutiny. If that respectable thesis is true, the topic “the categories of being” is a pseudo-topic. Let us simply assume that the respectable thesis is false and that things fall into various natural classes—hereinafter, simply classes.

Some of the classes into which we sort things are more comprehensive than others: all dogs are animals, but not all animals are dogs; all animals are living organisms, but not all living organisms are animals .... Now the very expression “sort things into classes” suggests that there is a most comprehensive class: the class of things, the class of things that can be sorted into classes. But is this so?—and if it is so, are there classes that are “just less comprehensive” than this universal class? If there are, can we identify them?—and are there a vast (perhaps even an infinite) number of them, or some largish, messy number like forty-nine, or some small, neat number like seven or four? Let us call any such less comprehensive classes the ‘categories of being’ or the ‘ontological categories’. (The former term, if not the latter, presupposes a particular position on one question about the nature of being: that everything is, that the universal class is the class of beings, the class of things that are. It thus presupposes that Meinong was wrong to say that “there are things of which it is true that there are no such things”.)

The topic “the categories of being” is intermediate between the topic “the nature of being” and the topics that fall under the post-Medieval conception of metaphysics for a reason that can be illustrated by considering the problem of universals. Universals, if they indeed exist, are, in the first instance, properties or qualities or attributes (i.e.,

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“ductility” or “whiteness”) that are supposedly universally “present in” the members of classes of things and relations (i.e., “being to the north of”) that are supposedly universally present in the members of classes of sequences of things. “In the first instance”: it may be that things other than qualities and relations are universals, although qualities and relations are the items most commonly put forward as examples of universals. It may be that the novel *War and Peace* is a universal, a thing that is in some mode present in each of the many tangible copies of the novel. It may be that the word “horse” is a universal, a thing that is present in each of the many audible utterances of the word. And it may be that natural classes or kinds are themselves universals—it may be that there is such a thing as “the horse” or the species *Equus caballus*, distinct from its defining attribute “being a horse” or “equinity”, and in some sense “present in” each horse. (Perhaps some difference between the attribute “being a horse” and the attribute “being either a horse or a kitten” explains why the former is the defining attribute of a kind and the latter is not. Perhaps the former attribute exists and the latter does not; perhaps the former has the second-order attribute “naturalness” and the latter does not; perhaps the former is more easily apprehended by the intellect than the latter.)

The thesis that universals exist—or at any rate “subsist” or “have being”—is variously called ‘realism’ or ‘Platonic realism’ or ‘platonism’. All three terms are objectionable. Aristotle believed in the reality of universals, but it would be at best an oxymoron to call him a platonist or a Platonic realist. And ‘realism’ tout court has served as a name for a variety of philosophical theses. The thesis that universals do not exist—do not so much as subsist; have no being of any sort—is generally called ‘nominalism’. This term, too is objectionable. At one time, those who denied the existence of universals were fond of saying things like:

There is no such thing as “being a horse”: there is only the name [nomen, gen. *nominis*] “horse”, a mere *flatus vocis* [puff of sound].



Present-day nominalists, however, are aware, if earlier nominalists were not, that if the phrase ‘the name “horse” ’ designated an object, the object it designated would itself be a universal or something very like one. It would not be a mere puff of sound but would rather be what was common to the many puffs of sound that were its tokens.

The old debate between the nominalists and the realists continues to the present day. Most realists suppose that universals constitute one of the categories of being. This supposition could certainly be disputed without absurdity. Perhaps there is a natural class of things to which all universals belong but which contains other things as well (and is not the class of all things). Perhaps, for example, numbers and propositions are not universals, and perhaps numbers and propositions and universals are all members of a class of “abstract objects”, a class that some things do not belong to. Or perhaps there is such a thing as “the whiteness of the Taj Mahal” and perhaps this object and the universal “whiteness”—but not the Taj Mahal itself—both belong to the class of “properties”. Let us call such a class—a proper subclass of an ontological category, a natural class that is neither the class of all things nor one of the ontological categories—an ‘ontological sub-category’. It may indeed be that universals make up a sub-category of being and are members of the category of being “abstract object”. But few if any philosophers would suppose that universals were members of forty-nine sub-categories—much less of a vast number or an infinity of sub-categories. Most philosophers who believe in the reality of universals would want to say that universals, if they do not constitute an ontological category, at least constitute one of the “higher” sub-categories. If dogs form a natural class, this class is—by the terms of our definition—an ontological sub-category. And this class will no doubt be a subclass of many sub-categories: the genus *canis*, the class (in the biological sense) *mammalia*, ..., and so through a chain of sub-categories that eventually reaches some very general sub-category like “substance” or “material object”. Thus, although dogs may compose an ontological sub-category, this sub-category—unlike the category “universal”—is one of the “lower” ones. These reflections suggest that the topic “the categories of being” should

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be understood to comprehend both the categories of being *sensu stricto* and their immediate sub-categories.

Does the topic “the categories of being” belong to metaphysics in the “old” sense? A case can be made for saying that it does, based on the fact that Plato's theory of forms (universals, attributes) is a recurrent theme in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. In *Metaphysics*, two of Plato's central theses about the forms come in for vigorous criticism: (i) that things that would, if they existed, be “inactive” (the forms) could be the primary beings, the “most real” things, and (ii) that the attributes of things exist “separately” from the things whose attributes they are. We shall be concerned only with (ii). In the terminology of the Schools, that criticism can be put this way: Plato wrongly believed that universals existed *ante res* (prior to objects); the correct view is that universals exist *in rebus* (in objects). It is because this aspect of the problem of universals—whether universals exist *ante res* or *in rebus*—is discussed at length in *Metaphysics*, that a strong case can be made for saying that the problem of universals falls under the old conception of metaphysics. (And the question whether universals, given that they exist at all, exist *ante res* or *in rebus* is as controversial in the twenty-first century as it was in the thirteenth century and the fourth century B.C.E.) If we do decide that the problem of universals belongs to metaphysics on the old conception, then, since we have liberalized the old conception by applying to it the contemporary rule that the denial of a metaphysical position is to be regarded as a metaphysical position, we shall have to say that the question whether universals exist at all is a metaphysical question under the old conception—and that nominalism is therefore a metaphysical thesis.

There is, however, also a case to be made against classifying the problem of universals as a problem of metaphysics in the (liberalized) old sense. For there is more to the problem of universals than the question whether universals exist and the question whether, if they do exist, their existence is *ante res* or *in rebus*. For example, the problem of universals also includes questions about the relation between universals (if such there be) and the things that are not universals, the things usually called

particulars. Aristotle did not consider these questions in the *Metaphysics*. One might therefore plausibly contend that only one part of the problem of universals (the part that pertains to the existence and nature of universals) belongs to metaphysics in the old sense. At one time, a philosopher might have said,

The universal “doghood” is a thing that does not change. Therefore, questions about its nature belong to metaphysics, the science of things that do not change. But dogs are things that change. Therefore, questions concerning the relation of dogs to doghood do not belong to metaphysics.

But no contemporary philosopher would divide the topics that way—not even if he or she believed that doghood existed and was a thing that did not change. A contemporary philosopher—if that philosopher concedes that there is any problem that can properly be called “the problem of universals”—will see the problem of universals as a problem properly so called, as a problem having the kind of internal unity that leads philosophers to speak of a philosophical problem. And the same point applies to the topic “the categories of being”: every philosopher who is willing to say that “What are the categories of being?” is a meaningful question will assign every aspect of that question to metaphysics

Let us consider some aspects of the problem of universals that concern changing things. (That is, that concern particulars—for even if there are particulars that do not change, most of the particulars that figure in discussions of the problem of universals as examples are things that change.) Consider two white particulars—the Taj Mahal, say, and the Washington Monument. And suppose that both these particulars are white in virtue of (i.e., their being white consists in) their bearing some one, identifiable relation to the universal “whiteness”. Suppose further that we are able to single out this relation by some sort of act of intellectual attention or abstraction, and that (having done so) we have given it the name “falling under”. All white things and only white things fall under whiteness, and falling under whiteness is what it is to be white. (We pass over many questions that would have to be addressed if we

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were discussing the problem of universals for its own sake. For example, both blueness and redness are spectral color-properties, and whiteness is not. Does this fact imply that “being a spectral color-property” is, as one might say, a second-order universal? If so, does blueness “fall under” this universal in the same sense as the sense in which a copy of *Philosophical Studies* falls under blueness?)

Now what can we say about this relation, this “falling under”? What is it about the two objects whiteness and the Taj Mahal that is responsible for the fact that the latter falls under the former? Is the Taj perhaps a “bundle” of universalia ante res, and does it fall under whiteness in virtue of the fact that whiteness is one of the universals that is a constituent of the bundle that it is? Or might it be that a particular like the Taj, although it indeed has universals as constituents, is something more than its universal constituents? Might it be that the Taj has a constituent that is not a universal, a “substrate”, a particular that is in some sense property-less and that holds the universal constituents of the Taj together—that “bundles” them? (If we take that position, then we may want to say, with Armstrong (1989: 94–96), that the Taj is a ‘thick particular’ and its substrate a ‘thin particular’: a thick particular being a thin particular taken together with the properties it bundles.) Or might the Taj have constituents that are neither universals nor substrates? Might we have been too hasty when we defined ‘particulars’ as things that are not universals? Could there perhaps be two kinds of non-universals, concrete non-universals or concrete individuals (those would be the particulars, thick or thin), and abstract non-universals or abstract individuals (‘accidents’ or ‘tropes’ or ‘property instances’), things that are properties or qualities (and relations as well), things like “the (individual) whiteness of the Taj Mahal”? Is the Taj perhaps a bundle not of universals but of accidents? Or is it composed of a substrate and a bundle of accidents? And we cannot neglect the possibility that Aristotle was right and that universals exist only in rebus. If that is so, we must ask what the relation is between the matter that composes a particular and the universals that inhere in it—that inhere simultaneously in “this” matter and in “that” matter.

The series of questions that was set out in the preceding paragraph was introduced by observing that the problem of universals includes both questions about the existence and nature of universals and questions about how universals are related to the particulars that fall under them. Many of the theories that were alluded to in that series of questions could be described as theories of the “ontological structure” of non-universals. We can contrast ontological structure with mereological structure. A philosophical question concerns the mereological structure of an object if it is a question about the relation between that object and those of its constituents that belong to the same ontological category as the object. For example, the philosopher who asks whether the Taj Mahal has a certain block of marble among its constituents essentially or only accidentally is asking a question about the mereological structure of the Taj, since the block and the building belong to the same ontological category. But the philosopher who asks whether the Taj has “whiteness” as a constituent and the philosopher who supposes that the Taj does have this property-constituent and asks, “What is the nature of this relation ‘constituent of’ that ‘whiteness’ bears to the Taj?” are asking questions about its ontological structure.

Many philosophers have supposed that particulars fall under universals by somehow incorporating them into their ontological structure. And other philosophers have supposed that the ontological structure of a particular incorporates individual properties or accidents—and that an accident is an accident of a certain particular just in virtue of being a constituent of that particular.

Advocates of the existence of ante res universals, and particularly those who deny that these universals are constituents of particulars, tend to suppose that universals abound—that there is not only such a universal as whiteness but such a universal as “being both white and round and either shiny or not made of silver”. Advocates of other theories of universals are almost always less liberal in the range of universals whose existence they will allow. The advocate of in rebus universals is unlikely

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to grant the existence of “being both white and round and either shiny or not made of silver”, even in the case in which there is an object that is both white and round and either shiny or not made of silver (such as a non-shiny white plastic ball).

The two topics “the categories of being” and “the ontological structure of objects” are intimately related to each other and to the problem of universals. It is not possible to propose a solution to the problem of universals that does not have implications for the topic “the categories of being”. (Even nominalism implies that at least one popular candidate for the office “ontological category” is non-existent or empty.) It is certainly possible to maintain that there are ontological categories that are not directly related to the problem of universals (“proposition”, “state of affairs”, “event”, “mere possibile”), but any philosopher who maintains this will nevertheless maintain that if there are universals they make up at least one of the higher ontological sub-categories. And it seems that it is possible to speak of ontological structure only if one supposes that there are objects of different ontological categories. So whatever metaphysics comprehends, it must comprehend every aspect of the problem of universals and every aspect of the topics “the categories of being” and “the ontological structure of objects”. For a recent investigation of the problems that have been discussed in this section, see Lowe (2006).

We turn now to a topic that strictly speaking belongs to “the categories of being”, but which is important enough to be treated separately.

### Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss the Being and Universal.

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## 4.4 ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE

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I have shown that there are two problems with universals and particulars. If there were a way to distinguish between individuals and universals, then there would be a solution to these problems. The distinction between an existence and an essence is such a thing. Each individual has a distinct existence but a universal has a common essence.

Universals are any thing that has a name. For example, redness, humanity and oneness are all universals. Each of these things are different from each other because of what they are. The name for “what it is” is essence. So the essence of redness is the color red, the essence of oneness is unity and the essence of humanity is rational animality. Each of these essences is different from each other, but every instance of an essence is the same essence.

Particulars are named with “this”, “that” or by pointing. So my apple is different from your apple, even if they have the same essence. This difference is their existence. That something is that it exists is normally different from what it is. Even though my apple and your apple are the same thing because they are both apples, they are different things because they have different existences. I can destroy my apple, and yours remains unharmed. The existence of my apple is not a feature of my apple. The existence of my apple just is my apple existing right now.

The previous problem with universals can now be resolved. The redness of a painting and a box are the same because they have the same essence. The redness of the painting is different from the redness of the box because each one has a different existence. What is true of redness is true of all universals, and all named things. Anything that is named, is unique as a particular because its existence is unique. It is the same universal

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because each instance of that universal has the same essence as any other instance.

The previous problem with particulars can also be resolved. There is no feature or history that makes one particular unique. So Stephen is not unique because he has a particular history, has a unique genetic code or because of any other feature. He is unique because his existence is different from absolutely everyone else's existence. If he were to have an identical twin, then each one would have a different existence. That is the only thing that is different from every other thing that no other thing could ever share with him.

Since the previous problems with particulars and universals are solved, it is natural for further problems to arise. There are several areas to examine. One of them is various essences. Categorizing them and determining which is most fundamental if any is a next step. Another area is the difference between essence and existence. Particulars must have both, but how are they related to each other? A final area is the nature of existence itself.

I will begin with the categorization of essence. Next I will discuss different universals and the relationships between them.

Everything has two principles that explain its being, essence and existence. In all beings except for God, these principles are both required in order for the actually existing individual thing to be. Each is distinct from the other, yet this distinction is a real, not merely logical, one. The following explanation summarizes the main argument of *On Being and Essence*, Chapter 4, which can be found by following this link.

Essence may be described as the "what" of a thing. It is the quiddity of the thing, that which is known about it by our forming of a concept. It is a formal principle since for material reality, it is abstracted by the human intellect. Hence, it is a universal principle making many material individuals to be of the same kind (for angels, it makes each angel to be a



species unto itself). But, it is obvious upon reflection that "what a thing is" and "that it is" are completely different statements.

That a thing is or has existence, is a principle really distinct from its quiddity. In no case (except for God) does the essence of a thing indicate anything about whether that thing really is. The essence of a horse that exists, and the essence of a horse that doesn't are absolutely the same, namely horse-ness; a horse's existing is totally different from what kind of a thing it is. Therefore, there must be something about really existing things that accounts for this very existing, and it is not their essence; it is their existence. Existence then is that which makes essences to be, to exercise the act of existing. St. Thomas indicated the activity of being, existence, with the Latin of "to be", esse.

By saying that existence is the act of being (esse) exercised by beings, Thomas understands it to be similar to form, in that it actualizes a potency as form actualizes matter. Taking the notions of an act/potency relationship learned from cosmology as form and matter, he expands the notion of form by means of analogy. Just as the substantial form of a material being determines and makes actual some part of matter, so esse actualizes the potency of a thing's essence. This similarity is an analogous one because, the esse and essence of a thing are not separable in real beings, as the form is separable from matter in abstraction; the two are only distinguishable because of their own very real distinction. Esse is logically prior to all other actuality because a thing cannot be in a certain way unless it simply is. So, because of this logical priority of existence, Thomas calls it "the most formal of all." "It is the actuality of all acts" since a thing is in virtue of esse and "acts are of supposits."

### **Check Your Progress 2**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss the relation of Substances and Essence.

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## 4.5 LET US SUM UP

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The essence-existence distinction was a central issue in metaphysical disputes among post-Avicennian thinkers in the Islamic world. One group argued that what a thing is is different from that it is only conceptually. A rival view would have it that the distinction between essence and existence is real. The purpose of this article is to analyze the philosophical core of the dispute, by isolating the main arguments and their metaphysical foundations. I will study four central issues of the essence-existence debate: (1) the argument that existence is distinct from essence because one can conceive of an essence without knowing whether it exists; (2) the argument that if existence were really distinct from essence, existence would itself have to exist, leading to an infinite regress; (3) the question of whether God is responsible for the existence of essences only or also for their essential content (this relates to the problem of the ontological status of the non-existent); (4) the problem of whether essences are prior to existence.

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## 4.6 KEY WORDS

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**Essence:** In philosophy, essence is the property or set of properties that make an entity or substance what it fundamentally is, and which it has by necessity, and without which it loses its identity.

**Universality:** In analytic philosophy, universality is the idea that universal facts exist and can be progressively discovered, as opposed to relativism.

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## 4.7 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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1. Discuss the Being and Universal.
2. Discuss the relation of Substances and Essence.

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## 4.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to Check your progress 1

1. In metaphysics, a universal is what particular things have in common, namely characteristics or qualities. In other words, universals are repeatable or recurrent entities that can be instantiated or exemplified by many particular things. For example, suppose there are two chairs in a room, each of which is green. These two chairs both share the quality of "chairness", as well as greenness or the quality of being green; in other words, they share a "universal". There are three major kinds of qualities or characteristics: types or kinds (e.g. mammal), properties (e.g. short, strong), and relations (e.g. father of, next to). These are all different types of universals.

Paradigmatically, universals are abstract (e.g. humanity), whereas particulars are concrete (e.g. the personhood of Socrates). However, universals are not necessarily abstract and particulars are not necessarily concrete. For example, one might hold that numbers are particular yet abstract objects. Likewise, some philosophers, such as D. M. Armstrong, consider universals to be concrete.

### Answers to Check your progress 2

1. Aristotle turns in Z.4 to a consideration of the next candidate for substance: essence. ('Essence' is the standard English translation of Aristotle's curious phrase *to ti ên einai*, literally "the what it was to be" for a thing. This phrase so boggled his Roman translators that they coined the word *essentia* to render the entire phrase, and it is from this Latin word that ours derives. Aristotle also sometimes uses the shorter phrase *to ti esti*, literally "the what it is," for approximately the same idea.) In his logical works, Aristotle links the notion of essence to that of definition (*horismos*)—"a definition is an account (*logos*) that signifies an essence" (*Topics* 102a3)—and he

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links both of these notions to a certain kind of per se predication (kath' hauto, literally, “in respect of itself”)—“what belongs to a thing in respect of itself belongs to it in its essence (en tōi ti esti)” for we refer to it “in the account that states the essence” (Posterior Analytics, 73a34–5). He reiterates these ideas in Z.4: “there is an essence of just those things whose logos is a definition” (1030a6), “the essence of a thing is what it is said to be in respect of itself” (1029b14). It is important to remember that for Aristotle, one defines things, not words. The definition of tiger does not tell us the meaning of the word ‘tiger’; it tells us what it is to be a tiger, what a tiger is said to be in respect of itself. Thus, the definition of tiger states the essence—the “what it is to be” of a tiger, what is predicated of the tiger per se.

Aristotle’s preliminary answer (Z.4) to the question “What is substance?” is that substance is essence, but there are important qualifications. For, as he points out, “definition (horismos), like ‘what it is’ (ti esti), is said in many ways” (1030a19). That is, items in all the categories are definable, so items in all the categories have essences—just as there is an essence of man, there is also an essence of white and an essence of musical. But, because of the pros hen equivocity of ‘is’, such essences are secondary—“definition and essence are primarily (protōs) and without qualification (haplōs) of substances” (1030b4–6). Thus, Z.4 tells us, it is only these primary essences that are substances. Aristotle does not here work out the details of this “hierarchy of essences” (Loux, 1991), but it is possible to reconstruct a theory of such a hierarchy on the basis of subsequent developments in Book Z.

In Z.6, Aristotle goes on to argue that if something is “primary” and “spoken of in respect of itself (kath' hauto legomenon)” it is one and the same as its essence. The precise meaning of this claim, as well as the nature and validity of the arguments offered in support of it, are matters of scholarly controversy. But it does seem safe to say that Aristotle thinks that an “accidental unity” such as a pale man is not a kath' hauto legomenon (since pallor is an accidental characteristic of a man) and so

is not the same as its essence. Pale man, that is to say, does not specify the “what it is” of any primary being, and so cannot be an essence of the primary kind. As Z.4 has already told us, “only species of a genus have an essence” (1030a11–12) in the primary sense. Man is a species, and so there is an essence of man; but pale man is not a species and so, even if there is such a thing as the essence of pale man, it is not, at any rate, a primary essence.

At this point there appears to be a close connection between the essence of a substance and its species (*eidos*), and this might tempt one to suppose that Aristotle is identifying the substance of a thing (since the substance of a thing is its essence) with its species. (A consequence of this idea would be that Aristotle is radically altering his conception of the importance of the species, which in the *Categories* he called a secondary substance, that is, a substance only in a secondary sense.) But such an identification would be a mistake, for two reasons. First, Aristotle’s point at 1030a11 is not that a species is an essence, but that an essence of the primary kind corresponds to a species (e.g., man) and not to some more narrowly delineated kind (e.g., pale man). Second, the word ‘*eidos*’, which meant ‘species’ in the logical works, has acquired a new meaning in a hylomorphic context, where it means ‘form’ (contrasted with ‘matter’) rather than ‘species’ (contrasted with ‘genus’). In the conceptual framework of *Metaphysics Z*, a universal such as man or horse—which was called a species and a secondary substance in the *Categories*—is construed as “not a substance, but a compound of a certain formula and a certain matter, taken universally” (*Z.10*, 1035b29–30). The *eidos* that is primary substance in *Book Z* is not the species that an individual substance belongs to but the form that is predicated of the matter of which it is composed.

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# UNIT 5: SUBSTANCE: ARISTOTLE’S ACCOUNT

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## STRUCTURE

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Substance: Aristotle’s account
- 5.3 Substance and properties
- 5.4 Kind and activity
- 5.5 Let us sum up
- 5.6 Key Words
- 5.7 Questions for Review
- 5.8 Suggested readings and references
- 5.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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After this unit, students will able to understand:

- To know about the Substance: Aristotle’s account;
- To discuss the Substance and properties ;
- To find out the relation with Kind and activity.

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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The first major work in the history of philosophy to bear the title “Metaphysics” was the treatise by Aristotle that we have come to know by that name. But Aristotle himself did not use that title or even describe his field of study as ‘metaphysics’; the name was evidently coined by the first century C.E. editor who assembled the treatise we know as Aristotle’s Metaphysics out of various smaller selections of Aristotle’s works. The title ‘metaphysics’—literally, ‘after the Physics’—very likely indicated the place the topics discussed therein were intended to occupy in the philosophical curriculum. They were to be studied after the treatises dealing with nature (ta phusika). In this entry, we discuss the ideas that are developed in Aristotle’s treatise.



## Substance, Matter, and Subject

Z.3 begins with a list of four possible candidates for being the substance of something: essence, universal, genus, and subject. Presumably, this means that if  $x$  is a substance, then the substance of  $x$  might be either (i) the essence of  $x$ , or (ii) some universal predicated of  $x$ , or (iii) a genus that  $x$  belongs to, or (iv) a subject of which  $x$  is predicated. The first three candidates are taken up in later chapters, and Z.3 is devoted to an examination of the fourth candidate: the idea that the substance of something is a subject of which it is predicated.

A subject, Aristotle tells us, is “that of which everything else is predicated, while it is itself not predicated of anything else” (1028b36). This characterization of a subject is reminiscent of the language of the *Categories*, which tells us that a primary substance is not predicated of anything else, whereas other things are predicated of it. Candidate (iv) thus seems to reiterate the *Categories* criterion for being a substance. But there are two reasons to be wary of drawing this conclusion. First, whereas the subject criterion of the *Categories* told us that substances were the ultimate subjects of predication, the subject criterion envisaged here is supposed to tell us what the substance of something is. So what it would tell us is that if  $x$  is a substance, then the substance of  $x$ —that which makes  $x$  a substance—is a subject that  $x$  is predicated of. Second, as his next comment makes clear, Aristotle has in mind something other than this *Categories* idea. For the subject that he here envisages, he says, is either matter or form or the compound of matter and form. These are concepts from Aristotle’s *Physics*, and none of them figured in the ontology of the *Categories*. To appreciate the issues Aristotle is raising here, we must briefly compare his treatment of the notion of a subject in the *Physics* with that in the *Categories*.

In the *Categories*, Aristotle was concerned with subjects of predication: what are the things we talk about, and ascribe properties to? In the *Physics*, his concern is with subjects of change: what is it that bears (at

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different times) contrary predicates and persists through a process of change? But there is an obvious connection between these conceptions of a subject, since a subject of change must have one predicate belonging to it at one time that does not belong to it at another time. Subjects of change, that is, are also subjects of predication. (The converse is not true: numbers are subjects of predication—six is even, seven is prime—but not of change.)

In the *Categories*, individual substances (a man, a horse) were treated as fundamental subjects of predication. They were also understood, indirectly, as subjects of change. (“A substance, one and the same in number, can receive contraries. An individual man, for example, being one and the same, becomes now pale and now dark, now hot and now cold, now bad and now good” 4a17–20.) These are changes in which substances move, or alter, or grow. What the *Categories* did not explore, however, are changes in which substances are generated or destroyed. But the theory of change Aristotle develops in the *Physics* requires some other subject for changes such as these—a subject of which substance is predicated—and it identifies matter as the fundamental subject of change (192a31–32). Change is seen in the *Physics* as a process in which matter either takes on or loses form.

The concepts of matter and form, as we noted, are absent from the *Categories*. Individual substances—this man or that horse—apart from their accidental characteristics—the qualities, etc., that inhere in them—are viewed in that work as essentially simple, unanalyzable atoms. Although there is metaphysical structure to the fact that, e.g., this horse is white (a certain quality inheres in a certain substance), the fact that this is a horse is a kind of brute fact, devoid of metaphysical structure. This horse is a primary substance, and horse, the species to which it belongs, is a secondary substance. But there is no predicative complex corresponding to the fact that this is a horse in the way that there is such a complex corresponding to the fact that this horse is white.

But from the point of view of the *Physics*, substantial individuals are seen as predicative complexes (cf. Matthen 1987b); they are hylomorphic compounds—compounds of matter and form—and the subject criterion looks rather different from the hylomorphic perspective. *Metaphysics Z.3* examines the subject criterion from this perspective.

Matter, form, and the compound of matter and form may all be considered subjects, Aristotle tells us, (1029a2–4), but which of them is substance? The subject criterion by itself leads to the answer that the substance of *x* is an entirely indeterminate matter of which *x* is composed (1029a10). For form is predicated of matter as subject, and one can always analyze a hylomorphic compound into its predicates and the subject of which they are predicated. And when all predicates have been removed (in thought), the subject that remains is nothing at all in its own right—an entity all of whose properties are accidental to it (1029a12–27). The resulting subject is matter from which all form has been expunged. (Traditional scholarship calls this “prime matter,” but Aristotle does not here indicate whether he thinks there actually is such a thing.) So the subject criterion leads to the answer that the substance of *x* is the formless matter of which it is ultimately composed.

But Aristotle rejects this answer as impossible (1029a28), claiming that substance must be “separate” (*chôriston*) and “some this” (*tode ti*, sometimes translated “this something”), and implying that matter fails to meet this requirement. Precisely what the requirement amounts to is a matter of considerable scholarly debate, however. A plausible interpretation runs as follows. Being separate has to do with being able to exist independently (*x* is separate from *y* if *x* is capable of existing independently of *y*), and being some this means being a determinate individual. So a substance must be a determinate individual that is capable of existing on its own. (One might even hold, although this is controversial, that on Aristotle’s account not every “this” is also “separate.” A particular color or shape might be considered a determinate individual that is not capable of existing on its own—it is always the color of shape of some substance or other.) But matter fails to be

simultaneously both *chôriston* and *tode ti*. The matter of which a substance is composed may exist independently of that substance (think of the wood of which a desk is composed, which existed before the desk was made and may survive the disassembly of the desk), but it is not as such any definite individual—it is just a quantity of a certain kind of matter. Of course, the matter may be construed as constituting a definite individual substance (the wood just is, one might say, the particular desk it composes), but it is in that sense not separate from the form or shape that makes it that substance (the wood cannot be that particular desk unless it is a desk). So although matter is in a sense separate and in a sense *some this*, it cannot be both separate and *some this*. It thus does not qualify as the substance of the thing whose matter it is.

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## 5.2 SUBSTANCE: ARISTOTLE'S ACCOUNT

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Aristotle himself described his subject matter in a variety of ways: as ‘first philosophy’, or ‘the study of being qua being’, or ‘wisdom’, or ‘theology’. A comment on these descriptions will help to clarify Aristotle’s topic.

In *Metaphysics* A.1, Aristotle says that “all men suppose what is called wisdom (*sophia*) to deal with the first causes (*aitia*) and the principles (*archai*) of things” (981b28), and it is these causes and principles that he proposes to study in this work. It is his customary practice to begin an inquiry by reviewing the opinions previously held by others, and that is what he does here, as Book A continues with a history of the thought of his predecessors about causes and principles.

These causes and principles are clearly the subject matter of what he calls ‘first philosophy’. But this does not mean the branch of philosophy that should be studied first. Rather, it concerns issues that are in some sense the most fundamental or at the highest level of generality. Aristotle distinguished between things that are “better known to us” and things that are “better known in themselves,” and maintained that we should begin our study of a given topic with things better known to us and arrive

ultimately at an understanding of things better known in themselves. The principles studied by ‘first philosophy’ may seem very general and abstract, but they are, according to Aristotle, better known in themselves, however remote they may seem from the world of ordinary experience. Still, since they are to be studied only by one who has already studied nature (which is the subject matter of the Physics), they are quite appropriately described as coming “after the Physics.”

Aristotle’s description ‘the study of being qua being’ is frequently and easily misunderstood, for it seems to suggest that there is a single (albeit special) subject matter—being qua being—that is under investigation. But Aristotle’s description does not involve two things—(1) a study and (2) a subject matter (being qua being)—for he did not think that there is any such subject matter as ‘being qua being’. Rather, his description involves three things: (1) a study, (2) a subject matter (being), and (3) a manner in which the subject matter is studied (qua being).

Aristotle’s Greek word that has been Latinized as ‘qua’ means roughly ‘in so far as’ or ‘under the aspect’. A study of x qua y, then, is a study of x that concerns itself solely with the y aspect of x. So Aristotle’s study does not concern some recondite subject matter known as ‘being qua being’. Rather it is a study of being, or better, of beings—of things that can be said to be—that studies them in a particular way: as beings, in so far as they are beings.

Of course, first philosophy is not the only field of inquiry to study beings. Natural science and mathematics also study beings, but in different ways, under different aspects. The natural scientist studies them as things that are subject to the laws of nature, as things that move and undergo change. That is, the natural scientist studies things qua movable (i.e., in so far as they are subject to change). The mathematician studies things qua countable and measurable. The metaphysician, on the other hand, studies them in a more general and abstract way—qua beings. So first philosophy studies the causes and principles of beings qua beings. In Γ.2, Aristotle adds that for this reason it studies the causes and principles

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of substances (ousiai). We will explain this connection in Section 3 below.

In Book E, Aristotle adds another description to the study of the causes and principles of beings qua beings. Whereas natural science studies objects that are material and subject to change, and mathematics studies objects that although not subject to change are nevertheless not separate from (i.e., independent of) matter, there is still room for a science that studies things (if indeed there are any) that are eternal, not subject to change, and independent of matter. Such a science, he says, is theology, and this is the “first” and “highest” science. Aristotle’s identification of theology, so conceived, with the study of being qua being has proved challenging to his interpreters.

Finally, we may note that in Book B, Aristotle delineates his subject matter in a different way, by listing the problems or perplexities (aporiai) he hopes to deal with. Characteristic of these perplexities, he says, is that they tie our thinking up in knots. They include the following, among others: Are sensible substances the only ones that exist, or are there others besides them? Is it kinds or individuals that are the elements and principles of things? And if it is kinds, which ones: the most generic or the most specific? Is there a cause apart from matter? Is there anything apart from material compounds? Are the principles limited, either in number or in kind? Are the principles of perishable things themselves perishable? Are the principles universal or particular, and do they exist potentially or actually? Are mathematical objects (numbers, lines, figures, points) substances? If they are, are they separate from or do they always belong to sensible things? And (“the hardest and most perplexing of all,” Aristotle says) are unity and being the substance of things, or are they attributes of some other subject? In the remainder of Book B, Aristotle presents arguments on both sides of each of these issues, and in subsequent books he takes up many of them again. But it is not always clear precisely how he resolves them, and it is possible that Aristotle did not think that the *Metaphysics* contains definitive solutions to all of these perplexities.

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## 5.3 SUBSTANCE AND PROPERTIES

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### The Role of Substance in the Study of Being Qua Being

The *Categories* leads us to expect that the study of being in general (being qua being) will crucially involve the study of substance, and when we turn to the *Metaphysics* we are not disappointed. First, in *Metaphysics*  $\Gamma$  Aristotle argues in a new way for the ontological priority of substance; and then, in Books  $Z$ ,  $H$ , and  $\Theta$ , he wrestles with the problem of what it is to be a substance. We will begin with  $\Gamma$ 's account of the central place of substance in the study of being qua being.

As we noted above, metaphysics (or, first philosophy) is the science which studies being qua being. In this respect it is unlike the specialized or departmental sciences, which study only part of being (only some of the things that exist) or study beings only in a specialized way (e.g., only in so far as they are changeable, rather than in so far as they are beings).

But 'being', as Aristotle tells us in  $\Gamma.2$ , is "said in many ways". That is, the verb 'to be' (*einai*) has different senses, as do its cognates 'being' (*on*) and 'entities' (*onta*). So the universal science of being qua being appears to founder on an equivocation: how can there be a single science of being when the very term 'being' is ambiguous?

Consider an analogy. There are dining tables, and there are tide tables. A dining table is a table in the sense of a smooth flat slab fixed on legs; a tide table is a table in the sense of a systematic arrangement of data in rows and columns. But there is not a single sense of 'table' which applies to both the piece of furniture at which I am writing these words and to the small booklet that lies upon it. Hence it would be foolish to expect that there is a single science of tables, in general, that would include among its objects both dining tables and tide tables. Tables, that is to say, do not constitute a single kind with a single definition, so no single science, or field of knowledge, can encompass precisely those things that are correctly called 'tables'.

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If the term ‘being’ were ambiguous in the way that ‘table’ is, Aristotle’s science of being qua being would be as impossible as a science of tables qua tables. But, Aristotle argues in  $\Gamma.2$ , ‘being’ is not ambiguous in this way. ‘Being’, he tells us, is ‘said in many ways’ but it is not merely (what he calls) ‘homonymous’, i.e., sheerly ambiguous. Rather, the various senses of ‘being’ have what he calls a ‘pros hen’ ambiguity—they are all related to a single central sense. (The Greek phrase ‘pros hen’ means “in relation to one.”)

Aristotle explains his point by means of some examples that he takes to be analogous to ‘being’. Consider the terms ‘healthy’ and ‘medical’. Neither of these has a single definition that applies uniformly to all cases: not every healthy (or medical) thing is healthy (medical) in the same sense of ‘healthy’ (‘medical’). There is a range of things that can be called ‘healthy’: people, diets, exercise, complexions, etc. Not all of these are healthy in the same sense. Exercise is healthy in the sense of being productive of health; a clear complexion is healthy in the sense of being symptomatic of health; a person is healthy in the sense of having good health.

But notice that these various senses have something in common: a reference to one central thing, health, which is actually possessed by only some of the things that are spoken of as ‘healthy’, namely, healthy organisms, and these are said to be healthy in the primary sense of the term. Other things are considered healthy only in so far as they are appropriately related to things that are healthy in this primary sense.

The situation is the same, Aristotle claims, with the term ‘being’. It, too, has a primary sense as well as related senses in which it applies to other things because they are appropriately related to things that are called ‘beings’ in the primary sense. The beings in the primary sense are substances; the beings in other senses are the qualities, quantities, etc., that belong to substances. An animal, e.g., a horse, is a being, and so is a color, e.g. white, a being. But a horse is a being in the primary sense—it is a substance—whereas the color white (a quality) is a being only



because it qualifies some substance. An account of the being of anything that is, therefore, will ultimately have to make some reference to substance. Hence, the science of being qua being will involve an account of the central case of beings—substances.

### **The Fundamental Principles: Axioms**

Before embarking on this study of substance, however, Aristotle goes on in Book  $\Gamma$  to argue that first philosophy, the most general of the sciences, must also address the most fundamental principles—the common axioms—that are used in all reasoning. Thus, first philosophy must also concern itself with the principle of non-contradiction (PNC): the principle that “the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect” (1005b19). This, Aristotle says, is the most certain of all principles, and it is not just a hypothesis. It cannot, however, be proved, since it is employed, implicitly, in all proofs, no matter what the subject matter. It is a first principle, and hence is not derived from anything more basic.

What, then, can the science of first philosophy say about the PNC? It cannot offer a proof of the PNC, since the PNC is presupposed by any proof one might offer—any purported proof of the PNC would therefore be circular. Aristotle thus does not attempt to prove the PNC; in the subsequent chapters of  $\Gamma$  he argues, instead, that it is impossible to disbelieve the PNC. Those who would claim to deny the PNC cannot, if they have any beliefs at all, believe that it is false. For one who has a belief must, if he is to express this belief to himself or to others, say something—he must make an assertion. He must, as Aristotle says, signify something. But the very act of signifying something is possible only if the PNC is accepted. Without accepting the PNC, one would have no reason to think that his words have any signification at all—they could not mean one thing rather than another. So anyone who makes any assertion has already committed himself to the PNC. Aristotle thus does not argue that the PNC is a necessary truth (that is, he does not try to

prove the PNC); rather, he argues that the PNC is indubitable. (For more on the PNC, see the discussion in the entry on Aristotle's logic).

### Substance and Definition

In Z.10 and 11, Aristotle returns to the consideration of essence and definition left off in Z.6, but now within the hylomorphic context developed in Z.7–9. The main question these chapters consider is whether the definition of *x* ever includes a reference to the matter of *x*. If some definitions include a reference to matter, then the link between essence and form would seem to be weakened.

Aristotle begins Z.10 by endorsing the following principle about definitions and their parts: “a definition is an account, and every account has parts, and part of the account stands to part of the thing in just the same way that the whole account stands to the whole thing” (1034b20–22). That is, if *y* is a part of a definable thing *x*, then the definition of *x* will include as a part something *z* that corresponds to *y*. Indeed, *z* must stand to *y* in the same relation that the definition of *x* stands in to *x*; that is, *z* is the definition of *y*. So, according to this principle, the definition of a thing will include the definitions of its parts.

In a way, this consequence of the principle seems very plausible, given Aristotle's idea that it is universals that are definable (Z.11, 1036a29). Consider as a definiendum a universal, such as man, and its definiens, rational animal. The parts of this definiens are the universals rational and animal. If these parts are, in turn, definable, then each should be replaced, in the definition of man, with its own definition, and so on. In this way the complete and adequate definition of a universal such as man will contain no parts that are further definable. All proper, or completely analyzed, definitions are ultimately composed of simple terms that are not further definable.

But the implication of this idea for the definitions of hylomorphic compounds is obvious: since matter appears to be a part of such a

compound, the definition of the compound will include, as a part, the definitions of its material components. And this consequence seems implausible to Aristotle. A circle, for example, seems to be composed of two semicircles (for it obviously may be divided into two semicircles), but the definition of circle cannot be composed of the definitions of its two semicircular parts. For, as Aristotle points out (1035b9), semicircle is defined in terms of circle, and not the other way around. His point is well taken, for if circles were defined in terms of semicircles, then presumably semicircles would be defined in terms of the quarter-circles of which they are composed, and so on, ad infinitum. The resulting infinite regress would make it impossible to define circle at all, for one would never reach the ultimate “simple” parts of which such a definition would be composed.

Aristotle flirts with the idea of distinguishing between different senses in which one thing can be a part of another (1034b33), but instead proposes a different solution: to specify carefully the whole of which the matter is allegedly a part. “The bronze is part of the compound statue, but not of the statue spoken of as form” (1035a6). Similarly, “the line when divided passes away into its halves, and the man into bones and muscle and flesh, but it does not follow that they are composed of these as parts of their essence” (1035a17–20). Rather, “it is not the substance but the compound that is divided into the body and its parts as into matter” (1035b21–2).

In restating his point “yet more clearly” (1035b4), Aristotle notes parenthetically another important aspect of his theory of substance. He reiterates the priority of form, and its parts, to the matter into which a compound is divided, and notes that “the soul of animals (for this is the substance of living things) is their substance” (1035b15). The idea recurs in Z.11, where he announces that “it is clear that the soul is the primary substance and the body is matter” (1037a5). It is further developed, in the *Metaphysics*, in Z.17, as we will see below, and especially in *De Anima*. For more detail on this topic, see Section 3 of the entry on Aristotle’s psychology.

## Notes

Returning now to the problem raised by the apparent need to refer to matter in the definition of a substance, we may note that the solution Aristotle offered in Z.10 is only partially successful. His point seems to be that whereas bronze may be a part of a particular statue, neither that particular batch of bronze nor even bronze in general enters into the essence of statue, since being made of bronze is no part of what it is to be a statue. But that is only because statues, although they must be made of some kind of matter, do not require any particular kind of matter. But what about kinds of substances that do require particular kinds of matter? Aristotle's distinction between form and compound cannot be used in such cases to isolate essence from matter. Thus there may after all be reasons for thinking that reference to matter will have to intrude into at least some definitions.

In Z.11, Aristotle addresses just such a case (although the passage is difficult and there is disagreement over its interpretation). "The form of man is always found in flesh and bones and parts of this kind," Aristotle writes (1036b4). The point is not just that each particular man must be made of matter, but that each one must be made of matter of a particular kind—flesh and bones, etc. "Some things," he continues, "surely are a particular form in a particular matter" (1036b23), so that it is not possible to define them without reference to their material parts (1036b28). Nevertheless, Aristotle ends Z.11 as if he has defended the claim that definition is of the form alone. Perhaps his point is that whenever it is essential to a substance that it be made of a certain kind of matter (e.g., that man be made of flesh and bones, or that "a saw cannot be made of wool or wood," H.4, 1044a28) this is in some sense a formal or structural requirement. A kind of matter, after all, can itself be analyzed hylomorphically—bronze, for example, is a mixture of copper and tin according to a certain ratio or formula (*logos*), which is in turn predicated of some more generic underlying subject. The reference to matter in a definition will thus always be to a certain kind of matter, and hence to a predicate, rather than a subject. At any rate, if by 'matter' one has in mind the ultimate subject alluded to in Z.3 (so-called 'prime matter'),

there will be no reference to it in any definition, “for this is indefinite” (1037a27).

Z.12 introduces a new problem about definitions—the so-called “unity of definition.” The problem is this: definitions are complex (a definiens is always some combination of terms), so what accounts for the definiendum being one thing, rather than many (1037b10)? Suppose that man is defined as two-footed animal; “why is this one and not many—two-footed and animal?” (1037b13–14). Presumably, Aristotle has in mind his discussion in Z.4 of such “accidental unities” as a pale man. The difference cannot be that our language contains a single word (‘man’) for a two-footed animal, but no single word for a pale man, for Aristotle has already conceded (1029b28) that we might very well have had a single term (he suggests himation, literally ‘cloak’) for a pale man, but that would still not make the formula ‘pale man’ a definition nor pale man an essence (1030a2).

Aristotle proposes a solution that applies to definitions reached by the “method of division.” According to this method (see Aristotle’s logic), one begins with the broadest genus containing the species to be defined, and divides the genus into two sub-genera by means of some differentia. One then locates the definiendum in one of the sub-genera, and proceeds to divide this by another differentia, and so on, until one arrives at the definiendum species. This is a classic definition by genus and differentia. Aristotle’s proposal is that “the division should be by the differentia of the differentia” (1038a9). For example, if one uses the differentia footed to divide the genus animal, one then uses a differentia such as cloven-footed for the next division. If one divides in this way, Aristotle claims, “clearly the last (or completing, teleutaia) differentia will be the substance of the thing and its definition” (1038a19). For each “differentia of a differentia” entails its predecessor (being cloven-footed entails being footed), and so the long chain of differentiae can be replaced simply by the last differentia. As Aristotle points out, “saying footed two-footed animal ... is saying the same thing more than once” (1038a22–24).

This proposal shows how a long string of differentiae in a definition can be reduced to one, but it does not solve the problem of the unity of definition. For we are still faced with the apparent fact that genus + differentia constitutes a plurality even if the differentia is the last, or “completing,” one. It is not surprising, then, that Aristotle returns to the problem of unity later (H.6) and offers a different solution.

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## 5.4 KIND AND ACTIVITY

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To understand the problems and project of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, it is best to begin with one of his earlier works, the *Categories*. Although placed by long tradition among his logical works (see the discussion in the entry on Aristotle’s logic), due to its analysis of the terms that make up the propositions out of which deductive inferences are constructed, the *Categories* begins with a strikingly general and exhaustive account of the things there are (ta onta)—beings. According to this account, beings can be divided into ten distinct categories. (Although Aristotle never says so, it is tempting to suppose that these categories are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive of the things there are.) They include substance, quality, quantity, and relation, among others. Of these categories of beings, it is the first, substance (ousia), to which Aristotle gives a privileged position.

Substances are unique in being independent things; the items in the other categories all depend somehow on substances. That is, qualities are the qualities of substances; quantities are the amounts and sizes that substances come in; relations are the way substances stand to one another. These various non-substances all owe their existence to substances—each of them, as Aristotle puts it, exists only ‘in’ a subject. That is, each non-substance “is in something, not as a part, and cannot exist separately from what it is in” (Cat. 1a25). Indeed, it becomes clear that substances are the subjects that these ontologically dependent non-substances are ‘in’.

Each member of a non-substance category thus stands in this inherence relation (as it is frequently called) to some substance or other—color is

always found in bodies, knowledge in the soul. Neither whiteness nor a piece of grammatical knowledge, for example, is capable of existing on its own. Each requires for its existence that there be some substance in which it inheres.

In addition to this fundamental inherence relation across categories, Aristotle also points out another fundamental relation that obtains between items within a single category. He describes this as the relation of “being said of a subject,” and his examples make clear that it is the relation of a more general to a less general thing within a single category. Thus, man is ‘said of’ a particular man, and animal is ‘said of’ man, and therefore, as Aristotle points out, animal is ‘said of’ the particular man also. The ‘said of’ relation, that is to say, is transitive (cf. 1b10). So the genus (e.g., animal) is ‘said of’ the species (e.g., man) and both genus and species are ‘said of’ the particular. The same holds in non-substance categories. In the category of quality, for example, the genus (color) is ‘said of’ the species (white) and both genus and species are ‘said of’ the particular white. There has been considerable scholarly dispute about these particulars in nonsubstance categories. For more detail, see the supplementary document:

### **Nonsubstantial Particulars**

The language of this contrast (‘in’ a subject vs. ‘said of’ a subject) is peculiar to the Categories, but the idea seems to recur in other works as the distinction between accidental vs. essential predication. Similarly, in works other than the Categories, Aristotle uses the label ‘universals’ (ta katholou) for the things that are “said of many;” things that are not universal he calls ‘particulars’ (ta kath’ hekasta). Although he does not use these labels in the Categories, it is not misleading to say that the doctrine of the Categories is that each category contains a hierarchy of universals and particulars, with each universal being ‘said of’ the lower-level universals and particulars that fall beneath it. Each category thus has the structure of an upside-down tree. At the top (or trunk) of the tree are the most generic items in that category (e.g., in the case of the

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category of substance, the genus plant and the genus animal); branching below them are universals at the next highest level, and branching below these are found lower levels of universals, and so on, down to the lowest level universals (e.g., such *intimae species* as man and horse); at the lowest level—the leaves of the tree—are found the individual substances, e.g., this man, that horse, etc.

The individuals in the category of substance play a special role in this scheme. Aristotle calls them “primary substances” (*prôtai ousiai*) for without them, as he says, nothing else would exist. Indeed, Aristotle offers an argument (2a35–2b7) to establish the primary substances as the fundamental entities in this ontology. Everything that is not a primary substance, he points out, stands in one of the two relations (inhering ‘in’, or being ‘said of’) to primary substances. A genus, such as animal, is ‘said of’ the species below it and, since they are ‘said of’ primary substances, so is the genus (recall the transitivity of the ‘said of’ relation). Thus, everything in the category of substance that is not itself a primary substance is, ultimately, ‘said of’ primary substances. And if there were no primary substances, there would be no “secondary” substances (species and genera), either. For these secondary substances are just the ways in which the primary substances are fundamentally classified within the category of substance. As for the members of non-substance categories, they too depend for their existence on primary substances. A universal in a non-substance category, e.g., color, in the category of quality, is ‘in’ body, Aristotle tells us, and therefore in individual bodies. For color could not be ‘in’ body, in general, unless it were ‘in’ at least some particular bodies. Similarly, particulars in non-substance categories (although there is not general agreement among scholars about what such particulars might be) cannot exist on their own. E.g., a determinate shade of color, or a particular and non-shareable bit of that shade, is not capable of existing on its own—if it were not ‘in’ at least some primary substance, it would not exist. So primary substances are the basic entities—the basic “things that there are”—in the world of the Categories.



**Check Your Progress 1**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. How do you know about the Substance: Aristotle's account?

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2. Discuss the Substance and properties.

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3. How do you find out the relation with Kind and activity?

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## **5.5 LET US SUM UP**

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In the seventeen chapters that make up Book Z of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle takes up the promised study of substance. He begins by reiterating and refining some of what he said in  $\Gamma$ : that 'being' is said in many ways, and that the primary sense of 'being' is the sense in which substances are beings. Here, however, he explicitly links the secondary senses of 'being' to the non-substance categories. The primacy of substance leads Aristotle to say that the age-old question 'What is being?' "is just the question 'What is substance?'" (1028b4).

One might have thought that this question had already been answered in the Categories. There we were given, as examples of primary substances, an individual man or horse, and we learned that a primary substance is “what is neither in a subject nor said of a subject” (2a10). This would seem to provide us with both examples of, and criteria for being, primary substances. But in Metaphysics Z, Aristotle does not seem to take either the examples or the criteria for granted.

In Z.2 he recounts the various answers that have been given to the question of which things are substances—bodies (including plants, animals, the parts of plants and animals, the elements, the heavenly bodies), things more basic than bodies (surfaces, lines, and points), imperceptible things (such as Platonic Forms and mathematical objects)—and seems to regard them all as viable candidates at this point. He does not seem to doubt that the clearest examples of substances are perceptible ones, but leaves open the question whether there are others as well.

Before answering this question about examples, however, he says that we must first answer the question about criteria: what is it to be a substance (*tên ousian prôton ti estin*)? The negative criterion (“neither in a subject nor said of a subject”) of the Categories tells us only which things are substances. But even if we know that something is a substance, we must still say what makes it a substance—what the cause is of its being a substance. This is the question to which Aristotle next turns. To answer it is to identify, as Aristotle puts it, the substance of that thing.

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## 5.6 KEY WORDS

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accident: *sumbebêkos*

accidental: *kata sumbebêkos*

account: *logos*

actuality: *energeia*, *entelecheia*

alteration: *alloiôsis*

affirmative: *kataphatikos*

assertion: *apophansis* (sentence with a truth value, declarative sentence)

assumption: hupothesis

attribute: pathos

axiom: axioma

be: einai

being(s): on, onta

belong: huparchein

category: katêgoria

cause: aition, aitia

change: kinêsis, metabolê

come to be: gignesthai

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## 5.7 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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1. How do you know about the Substance: Aristotle's account?
2. Discuss the Substance and properties
3. How do you find out the relation with Kind and activity?

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## 5.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to Check your progress 1

1. In the seventeen chapters that make up Book Z of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle takes up the promised study of substance. He begins by reiterating and refining some of what he said in  $\Gamma$ : that ‘being’ is said in many ways, and that the primary sense of ‘being’ is the sense in which substances are beings. Here, however, he explicitly links the secondary senses of ‘being’ to the non-substance categories. The primacy of substance leads Aristotle to say that the age-old question ‘What is being?’ “is just the question ‘What is substance?’” (1028b4).

One might have thought that this question had already been answered in the *Categories*. There we were given, as examples of primary substances, an individual man or horse, and we learned that a primary substance is “what is neither in a subject nor said of a subject” (2a10). This would seem to provide us with both examples of, and criteria for being, primary substances. But in *Metaphysics Z*, Aristotle does not seem to take either the examples or the criteria for granted.

2. Aristotle explains his point by means of some examples that he takes to be analogous to ‘being’. Consider the terms ‘healthy’ and ‘medical’. Neither of these has a single definition that applies uniformly to all cases: not every healthy (or medical) thing is healthy (medical) in the same sense of ‘healthy’ (‘medical’). There is a range of things that can be called ‘healthy’: people,

diets, exercise, complexions, etc. Not all of these are healthy in the same sense. Exercise is healthy in the sense of being productive of health; a clear complexion is healthy in the sense of being symptomatic of health; a person is healthy in the sense of having good health.

3. Substances are unique in being independent things; the items in the other categories all depend somehow on substances. That is, qualities are the qualities of substances; quantities are the amounts and sizes that substances come in; relations are the way substances stand to one another. These various non-substances all owe their existence to substances—each of them, as Aristotle puts it, exists only ‘in’ a subject. That is, each non-substance “is in something, not as a part, and cannot exist separately from what it is in” (Cat. 1a25). Indeed, it becomes clear that substances are the subjects that these ontologically dependent non-substances are ‘in’.

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# UNIT 6: RATIONALISM AND EMPIRICISM

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## STRUCTURE

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Rationalism
- 6.3 Empiricism
- 6.4 The Intuition/Deduction Thesis
- 6.5 The Innate Knowledge Thesis
- 6.6 The Innate Concept Thesis
- 6.7 Let us sum up
- 6.8 Key Words
- 6.9 Questions for Review
- 6.10 Suggested readings and references
- 6.11 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 6.0 OBJECTIVES

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The dispute between rationalism and empiricism concerns the extent to which we are dependent upon sense experience in our effort to gain knowledge. Rationalists claim that there are significant ways in which our concepts and knowledge are gained independently of sense experience. Empiricists claim that sense experience is the ultimate source of all our concepts and knowledge.

Rationalists generally develop their view in two ways. First, they argue that there are cases where the content of our concepts or knowledge outstrips the information that sense experience can provide. Second, they construct accounts of how reason in some form or other provides that additional information about the world. Empiricists present complementary lines of thought. First, they develop accounts of how experience provides the information that rationalists cite, insofar as we have it in the first place. (Empiricists will at times opt for skepticism as an alternative to rationalism: if experience cannot provide the concepts or



knowledge the rationalists cite, then we don't have them.) Second, empiricists attack the rationalists' accounts of how reason is a source of concepts or knowledge.

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## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

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The dispute between rationalism and empiricism takes place within epistemology, the branch of philosophy devoted to studying the nature, sources and limits of knowledge. The defining questions of epistemology include the following.

What is the nature of propositional knowledge, knowledge that a particular proposition about the world is true?

To know a proposition, we must believe it and it must be true, but something more is required, something that distinguishes knowledge from a lucky guess. Let's call this additional element 'warrant'. A good deal of philosophical work has been invested in trying to determine the nature of warrant.

How can we gain knowledge?

We can form true beliefs just by making lucky guesses. How to gain warranted beliefs is less clear. Moreover, to know the world, we must think about it, and it is unclear how we gain the concepts we use in thought or what assurance, if any, we have that the ways in which we divide up the world using our concepts correspond to divisions that actually exist.

What are the limits of our knowledge?

Some aspects of the world may be within the limits of our thought but beyond the limits of our knowledge; faced with competing descriptions of them, we cannot know which description is true. Some aspects of the world may even be beyond the limits of our thought, so that we cannot

form intelligible descriptions of them, let alone know that a particular description is true.

The disagreement between rationalists and empiricists primarily concerns the second question, regarding the sources of our concepts and knowledge. In some instances, their disagreement on this topic leads them to give conflicting responses to the other questions as well. They may disagree over the nature of warrant or about the limits of our thought and knowledge. Our focus here will be on the competing rationalist and empiricist responses to the second question.

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## 6.2 RATIONALISM

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To be a rationalist is to adopt at least one of three claims. The Intuition/Deduction thesis concerns how we become warranted in believing propositions in a particular subject area.

The Intuition/Deduction Thesis: Some propositions in a particular subject area, S, are knowable by us by intuition alone; still others are knowable by being deduced from intuited propositions.

Intuition is a form of rational insight. Intellectually grasping a proposition, we just “see” it to be true in such a way as to form a true, warranted belief in it. (As discussed in Section 2 below, the nature of this intellectual “seeing” needs explanation.) Deduction is a process in which we derive conclusions from intuited premises through valid arguments, ones in which the conclusion must be true if the premises are true. We intuit, for example, that the number three is prime and that it is greater than two. We then deduce from this knowledge that there is a prime number greater than two. Intuition and deduction thus provide us with knowledge a priori, which is to say knowledge gained independently of sense experience.

We can generate different versions of the Intuition/Deduction thesis by substituting different subject areas for the variable ‘S’. Some rationalists take mathematics to be knowable by intuition and deduction. Some place ethical truths in this category. Some include metaphysical claims, such as that God exists, we have free will, and our mind and body are distinct

substances. The more propositions rationalists include within the range of intuition and deduction, and the more controversial the truth of those propositions or the claims to know them, the more radical their rationalism.

Rationalists also vary the strength of their view by adjusting their understanding of warrant. Some take warranted beliefs to be beyond even the slightest doubt and claim that intuition and deduction provide beliefs of this high epistemic status. Others interpret warrant more conservatively, say as belief beyond a reasonable doubt, and claim that intuition and deduction provide beliefs of that caliber. Still another dimension of rationalism depends on how its proponents understand the connection between intuition, on the one hand, and truth, on the other. Some take intuition to be infallible, claiming that whatever we intuit must be true. Others allow for the possibility of false intuited propositions.

The second thesis associated with rationalism is the Innate Knowledge thesis.

The Innate Knowledge Thesis: We have knowledge of some truths in a particular subject area, S, as part of our rational nature.

Like the Intuition/Deduction thesis, the Innate Knowledge thesis asserts the existence of knowledge gained a priori, independently of experience. The difference between them rests in the accompanying understanding of how this a priori knowledge is gained. The Intuition/Deduction thesis cites intuition and subsequent deductive reasoning. The Innate Knowledge thesis offers our rational nature. Our innate knowledge is not learned through either sense experience or intuition and deduction. It is just part of our nature. Experiences may trigger a process by which we bring this knowledge to consciousness, but the experiences do not provide us with the knowledge itself. It has in some way been with us all along. According to some rationalists, we gained the knowledge in an earlier existence. According to others, God provided us with it at creation. Still others say it is part of our nature through natural selection.

## Notes

We get different versions of the Innate Knowledge thesis by substituting different subject areas for the variable 'S'. Once again, the more subjects included within the range of the thesis or the more controversial the claim to have knowledge in them, the more radical the form of rationalism. Stronger and weaker understandings of warrant yield stronger and weaker versions of the thesis as well.

The third important thesis of rationalism is the Innate Concept thesis.

The Innate Concept Thesis: We have some of the concepts we employ in a particular subject area, S, as part of our rational nature.

According to the Innate Concept thesis, some of our concepts are not gained from experience. They are part of our rational nature in such a way that, while sense experiences may trigger a process by which they are brought to consciousness, experience does not provide the concepts or determine the information they contain. Some claim that the Innate Concept thesis is entailed by the Innate Knowledge Thesis; a particular instance of knowledge can only be innate if the concepts that are contained in the known proposition are also innate. This is Locke's position (1690, Book I, Chapter IV, Section 1, p. 91). Others, such as Carruthers, argue against this connection (1992, pp. 53–54). The content and strength of the Innate Concept thesis varies with the concepts claimed to be innate. The more a concept seems removed from experience and the mental operations we can perform on experience the more plausibly it may be claimed to be innate. Since we do not experience perfect triangles but do experience pains, our concept of the former is a more promising candidate for being innate than our concept of the latter.

The Intuition/Deduction thesis, the Innate Knowledge thesis, and the Innate Concept thesis are essential to rationalism: to be a rationalist is to adopt at least one of them. Two other closely related theses are generally adopted by rationalists, although one can certainly be a rationalist

without adopting either of them. The first is that experience cannot provide what we gain from reason.

The Indispensability of Reason Thesis: The knowledge we gain in subject area, S, by intuition and deduction, as well as the ideas and instances of knowledge in S that are innate to us, could not have been gained by us through sense experience.

The second is that reason is superior to experience as a source of knowledge.

The Superiority of Reason Thesis: The knowledge we gain in subject area S by intuition and deduction or have innately is superior to any knowledge gained by sense experience.

How reason is superior needs explanation, and rationalists have offered different accounts. One view, generally associated with Descartes (1628, Rules II and III, pp. 1–4), is that what we know a priori is certain, beyond even the slightest doubt, while what we believe, or even know, on the basis of sense experience is at least somewhat uncertain. Another view, generally associated with Plato (Republic 479e-484c), locates the superiority of a priori knowledge in the objects known. What we know by reason alone, a Platonic form, say, is superior in an important metaphysical way, e.g. unchanging, eternal, perfect, a higher degree of being, to what we are aware of through sense experience.

Most forms of rationalism involve notable commitments to other philosophical positions. One is a commitment to the denial of scepticism for at least some area of knowledge. If we claim to know some truths by intuition or deduction or to have some innate knowledge, we obviously reject scepticism with regard to those truths. Rationalism in the form of the Intuition/Deduction thesis is also committed to epistemic foundationalism, the view that we know some truths without basing our belief in them on any others and that we then use this foundational knowledge to know more truths.

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## 6.3 EMPIRICISM

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## Notes

Empiricists endorse the following claim for some subject area.

The Empiricism Thesis: We have no source of knowledge in S or for the concepts we use in S other than sense experience.

Empiricism about a particular subject rejects the corresponding version of the Intuition/Deduction thesis and Innate Knowledge thesis. Insofar as we have knowledge in the subject, our knowledge is a posteriori, dependent upon sense experience. Empiricists also deny the implication of the corresponding Innate Concept thesis that we have innate ideas in the subject area. Sense experience is our only source of ideas. They reject the corresponding version of the Superiority of Reason thesis. Since reason alone does not give us any knowledge, it certainly does not give us superior knowledge. Empiricists generally reject the Indispensability of Reason thesis, though they need not. The Empiricism thesis does not entail that we have empirical knowledge. It entails that knowledge can only be gained, if at all, by experience. Empiricists may assert, as some do for some subjects, that the rationalists are correct to claim that experience cannot give us knowledge. The conclusion they draw from this rationalist lesson is that we do not know at all.

I have stated the basic claims of rationalism and empiricism so that each is relative to a particular subject area. Rationalism and empiricism, so relativized, need not conflict. We can be rationalists in mathematics or a particular area of mathematics and empiricists in all or some of the physical sciences. Rationalism and empiricism only conflict when formulated to cover the same subject. Then the debate, Rationalism vs. Empiricism, is joined. The fact that philosophers can be both rationalists and empiricists has implications for the classification schemes often employed in the history of philosophy, especially the one traditionally used to describe the Early Modern Period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries leading up to Kant. It is standard practice to group the major philosophers of this period as either rationalists or empiricists and to suggest that those under one heading share a common agenda in opposition to those under the other. Thus, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz are the Continental Rationalists in opposition to Locke, Berkeley

and Hume, the British Empiricists. We should adopt such general classification schemes with caution. The views of the individual philosophers are more subtle and complex than the simple-minded classification suggests. (See Loeb (1981) and Kenny (1986) for important discussions of this point.) Locke rejects rationalism in the form of any version of the Innate Knowledge or Innate Concept theses, but he nonetheless adopts the Intuition/Deduction thesis with regard to our knowledge of God's existence. Descartes and Locke have remarkably similar views on the nature of our ideas, even though Descartes takes many to be innate, while Locke ties them all to experience. The rationalist/empiricist classification also encourages us to expect the philosophers on each side of the divide to have common research programs in areas beyond epistemology. Thus, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz are mistakenly seen as applying a reason-centered epistemology to a common metaphysical agenda, with each trying to improve on the efforts of the one before, while Locke, Berkeley and Hume are mistakenly seen as gradually rejecting those metaphysical claims, with each consciously trying to improve on the efforts of his predecessors. It is also important to note that the rationalist/empiricist distinction is not exhaustive of the possible sources of knowledge. One might claim, for example, that we can gain knowledge in a particular area by a form of Divine revelation or insight that is a product of neither reason nor sense experience. In short, when used carelessly, the labels 'rationalist' and 'empiricist,' as well as the slogan that is the title of this essay, 'Rationalism vs. Empiricism,' can retard rather than advance our understanding.

Nonetheless, an important debate properly described as 'Rationalism vs. Empiricism' is joined whenever the claims for each view are formulated to cover the same subject. What is perhaps the most interesting form of the debate occurs when we take the relevant subject to be truths about the external world, the world beyond our own minds. A full-fledged rationalist with regard to our knowledge of the external world holds that some external world truths can and must be known a priori, that some of the ideas required for that knowledge are and must be innate, and that

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this knowledge is superior to any that experience could ever provide. The full-fledged empiricist about our knowledge of the external world replies that, when it comes to the nature of the world beyond our own minds, experience is our sole source of information. Reason might inform us of the relations among our ideas, but those ideas themselves can only be gained, and any truths about the external reality they represent can only be known, on the basis of sense experience. This debate concerning our knowledge of the external world will generally be our main focus in what follows.

Historically, the rationalist/empiricist dispute in epistemology has extended into the area of metaphysics, where philosophers are concerned with the basic nature of reality, including the existence of God and such aspects of our nature as freewill and the relation between the mind and body. Major rationalists (e.g., Descartes 1641) have presented metaphysical theories, which they have claimed to know by reason alone. Major empiricists (e.g., Hume 1739–40) have rejected the theories as either speculation, beyond what we can learn from experience, or nonsensical attempts to describe aspects of the world beyond the concepts experience can provide. The debate raises the issue of metaphysics as an area of knowledge. Kant puts the driving assumption clearly:

The very concept of metaphysics ensures that the sources of metaphysics can't be empirical. If something could be known through the senses, that would automatically show that it doesn't belong to metaphysics; that's an upshot of the meaning of the word 'metaphysics.' Its basic principles can never be taken from experience, nor can its basic concepts; for it is not to be physical but metaphysical knowledge, so it must be beyond experience. (1783, Preamble, I, p. 7)

The possibility then of metaphysics so understood, as an area of human knowledge, hinges on how we resolve the rationalist/empiricist debate. The debate also extends into ethics. Some moral objectivists (e.g., Ross 1930 and Huemer 2005) take us to know some fundamental objective moral truths by intuition, while some moral skeptics, who reject such



knowledge, (e.g., Mackie 1977) find the appeal to a faculty of moral intuition utterly implausible. More recently, the rationalist/empiricist debate has extended to discussions (e.g., Bealer 1999 and Alexander & Weinberg 2007) of the very nature of philosophical inquiry: to what extent are philosophical questions to be answered by appeals to reason or experience?

### Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss about Empiricism?

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2. Discuss about Rationalism.

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## 6.4 THE INTUITION/DEDUCTION THESIS

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The Intuition/Deduction thesis claims that we can know some propositions by intuition and still more by deduction. Many empiricists (e.g., Hume 1748) have been willing to accept the thesis so long as it is restricted to propositions solely about the relations among our own concepts. We can, they agree, know by intuition that our concept of God includes our concept of omniscience. Just by examining the

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concepts, we can intellectually grasp that the one includes the other. The debate between rationalists and empiricists is joined when the former assert, and the latter deny, the Intuition/Deduction thesis with regard to propositions that contain substantive information about the external world. Rationalists, such as Descartes, have claimed that we can know by intuition and deduction that God exists and created the world, that our mind and body are distinct substances, and that the angles of a triangle equal two right angles, where all of these claims are truths about an external reality independent of our thought. Such substantive versions of the Intuition/Deduction thesis are our concern in this section.

One defense of the Intuition/Deduction thesis assumes that we know some substantive external world truths, adds an analysis of what knowledge requires, and concludes that our knowledge must result from intuition and deduction. Descartes claims that knowledge requires certainty and that certainty about the external world is beyond what empirical evidence can provide. We can never be sure our sensory impressions are not part of a dream or a massive, demon orchestrated, deception. Only intuition and deduction can provide the certainty needed for knowledge, and, given that we have some substantive knowledge of the external world, the Intuition/Deduction thesis is true. As Descartes tells us, “all knowledge is certain and evident cognition” (1628, Rule II, p. 1) and when we “review all the actions of the intellect by means of which we are able to arrive at a knowledge of things with no fear of being mistaken,” we “recognize only two: intuition and deduction” (1628, Rule III, p. 3).

This line of argument is one of the least compelling in the rationalist arsenal. First, the assumption that knowledge requires certainty comes at a heavy cost, as it rules out so much of what we commonly take ourselves to know. Second, as many contemporary rationalists accept, intuition is not always a source of certain knowledge. The possibility of a deceiver gives us a reason to doubt our intuitions as well as our empirical beliefs. For all we know, a deceiver might cause us to intuit false propositions, just as one might cause us to have perceptions of

nonexistent objects. Descartes's classic way of meeting this challenge in the *Meditations* is to argue that we can know with certainty that no such deceiver interferes with our intuitions and deductions. They are infallible, as God guarantees their truth. The problem, known as the Cartesian Circle, is that Descartes's account of how we gain this knowledge begs the question, by attempting to deduce the conclusion that all our intuitions are true from intuited premises. Moreover, his account does not touch a remaining problem that he himself notes (1628, Rule VII, p. 7): Deductions of any appreciable length rely on our fallible memory.

A more plausible argument for the Intuition/Deduction thesis again assumes that we know some particular, external world truths, and then appeals to the nature of what we know, rather than to the nature of knowledge itself, to argue that our knowledge must result from intuition and deduction. Leibniz (1704) tells us the following.

The senses, although they are necessary for all our actual knowledge, are not sufficient to give us the whole of it, since the senses never give anything but instances, that is to say particular or individual truths. Now all the instances which confirm a general truth, however numerous they may be, are not sufficient to establish the universal necessity of this same truth, for it does not follow that what happened before will happen in the same way again. ... From which it appears that necessary truths, such as we find in pure mathematics, and particularly in arithmetic and geometry, must have principles whose proof does not depend on instances, nor consequently on the testimony of the senses, although without the senses it would never have occurred to us to think of them... (1704, Preface, pp. 150–151)

Leibniz goes on to describe our mathematical knowledge as “innate,” and his argument may be directed to support the Innate Knowledge thesis rather than the Intuition/Deduction thesis. For our purposes here, we can relate it to the latter, however: We have substantive knowledge about the external world in mathematics, and what we know in that area, we know to be necessarily true. Experience cannot warrant beliefs about what is necessarily the case. Hence, experience cannot be the source of our knowledge. The best explanation of our knowledge is that we gain it by

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intuition and deduction. Leibniz mentions logic, metaphysics and morals as other areas in which our knowledge similarly outstrips what experience can provide. Judgments in logic and metaphysics involve forms of necessity beyond what experience can support. Judgments in morals involve a form of obligation or value that lies beyond experience, which only informs us about what is the case rather than about what ought to be.

The strength of this argument varies with its examples of purported knowledge. Insofar as we focus on controversial claims in metaphysics, e.g., that God exists, that our mind is a distinct substance from our body, the initial premise that we know the claims is less than compelling. Taken with regard to other areas, however, the argument clearly has legs. We know a great deal of mathematics, and what we know, we know to be necessarily true. None of our experiences warrants a belief in such necessity, and we do not seem to base our knowledge on any experiences. The warrant that provides us with knowledge arises from an intellectual grasp of the propositions which is clearly part of our learning. Similarly, we seem to have such moral knowledge as that, all other things being equal, it is wrong to break a promise and that pleasure is intrinsically good. No empirical lesson about how things are can warrant such knowledge of how they ought to be.

This argument for the Intuition/Deduction thesis raises additional questions which rationalists must answer. Insofar as they maintain that our knowledge of necessary truths in mathematics or elsewhere by intuition and deduction is substantive knowledge of the external world, they owe us an account of this form of necessity. Many empiricists stand ready to argue that “necessity resides in the way we talk about things, not in the things we talk about” (Quine 1966, p. 174). Similarly, if rationalists claim that our knowledge in morals is knowledge of an objective form of obligation, they owe us an account of how objective values are part of a world of apparently valueless facts.

Perhaps most of all, rationalist defenders of the Intuition/Deduction thesis owe us an account of what intuition is and how it provides warranted true beliefs about the external world. What is it to intuit a proposition and how does that act of intuition support a warranted belief? Their argument presents intuition and deduction as an explanation of assumed knowledge that can't—they say—be explained by experience, but such an explanation by intuition and deduction requires that we have a clear understanding of intuition and how it supports warranted beliefs. Metaphorical characterizations of intuition as intellectual “grasping” or “seeing” are not enough, and if intuition is some form of intellectual “grasping,” it appears that all that is grasped is relations among our concepts, rather than facts about the external world. One current approach to the issue involves an appeal to Phenomenal Conservatism (Huemer 2001), the principle that if it seems to one as if something is the case, then one is *prima facie* justified in believing that it is so. Intuitions are then taken to be a particular sort of seeming or appearance: “[A]n intuition that *p* is a state of its seeming to one that *p* that is not dependent on inference from other beliefs and that results from thinking about *p*, as opposed to perceiving, remembering, or introspecting” (Huemer 2005, p. 102). Just as it can visually seem or appear to one as if there's a tree outside the window, it can intellectually seem or appear to one as if nothing can be both entirely red and entirely green. This approach aims to demystify intuitions; they are but one more form of seeming-state along with ones we gain from sense perception, memory and introspection. It does not, however, tell us all we need to know. Any intellectual faculty, whether it be sense perception, memory, introspection or intuition, provides us with warranted beliefs only if it is generally reliable. The reliability of sense perception stems from the causal connection between how external objects are and how we experience them. What accounts for the reliability of our intuitions regarding the external world? Is our intuition of a particular true proposition the outcome of some causal interaction between ourselves and some aspect of the world? What aspect? What is the nature of this causal interaction? That the number three is prime does not appear to cause anything, let alone our intuition that it is prime. As Michael

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Huemer (2005, p. 123) points out in mounting his own defense of moral intuitionism, “The challenge for the moral realist, then, is to explain how it would be anything more than chance if my moral beliefs were true, given that I do not interact with moral properties.”

These issues are made all the more pressing by the classic empiricist response to the argument. The reply is generally credited to Hume and begins with a division of all true propositions into two categories.

All the objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, “Relations of Ideas,” and “Matters of Fact.” Of the first are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic, and, in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain. That the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the square of the two sides is a proposition which expresses a relation between these figures. That three times five is equal to half of thirty expresses a relation between these numbers. Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe. Though there never were a circle or triangle in nature, the truths demonstrated by Euclid would forever retain their certainty and evidence. Matters of fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner, nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible, because it can never imply a contradiction and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness as if ever so conformable to reality. (Hume 1748, Section IV, Part 1, p. 40)

Intuition and deduction can provide us with knowledge of necessary truths such as those found in mathematics and logic, but such knowledge is not substantive knowledge of the external world. It is only knowledge of the relations of our own ideas. If the rationalist shifts the argument so it appeals to knowledge in morals, Hume’s reply is to offer an analysis of our moral concepts by which such knowledge is empirically gained knowledge of matters of fact.

Morals and criticism are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment. Beauty, whether moral or natural, is felt more properly than perceived. Or if we reason concerning it and endeavor to fix the standard, we regard a new fact, to wit, the general taste of mankind, or some other fact which may be the object of reasoning and inquiry. (Hume 1748, Section XII, Part 3, p. 173)

If the rationalist appeals to our knowledge in metaphysics to support the argument, Hume denies that we have such knowledge.

If we take in our hand any volume--of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance--let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion. (Hume 1748, Section XII, Part 3, p. 173)

An updated version of this general empiricist reply, with an increased emphasis on language and the nature of meaning, is given in the twentieth-century by A. J. Ayer's version of logical positivism. Adopting positivism's verification theory of meaning, Ayer assigns every cognitively meaningful sentence to one of two categories: either it is a tautology, and so true solely by virtue of the meaning of its terms and provides no substantive information about the world, or it is open to empirical verification. There is, then, no room for knowledge about the external world by intuition or deduction.

There can be no a priori knowledge of reality. For ... the truths of pure reason, the propositions which we know to be valid independently of all experience, are so only in virtue of their lack of factual content ... [By contrast] empirical propositions are one and all hypotheses which may be confirmed or discredited in actual sense experience. [Ayer 1952, pp. 86; 93–94]

The rationalists' argument for the Intuition/Deduction thesis goes wrong at the start, according to empiricists, by assuming that we can have

substantive knowledge of the external world that outstrips what experience can warrant. We cannot.

This empiricist reply faces challenges of its own. Our knowledge of mathematics seems to be about something more than our own concepts. Our knowledge of moral judgments seems to concern not just how we feel or act but how we ought to behave. The general principles that provide a basis for the empiricist view, e.g. Hume's overall account of our ideas, the Verification Principle of Meaning, are problematic in their own right. In various formulations, the Verification Principle fails its own test for having cognitive meaning. A careful analysis of Hume's *Inquiry*, relative to its own principles, may require us to consign large sections of it to the flames.

In all, rationalists have a strong argument for the Intuition/Deduction thesis relative to our substantive knowledge of the external world, but its success rests on how well they can answer questions about the nature and epistemic force of intuition made all the more pressing by the classic empiricist reply.

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## **6.5 THE INNATE KNOWLEDGE THESIS**

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The Innate Knowledge thesis joins the Intuition/Deduction thesis in asserting that we have a priori knowledge, but it does not offer intuition and deduction as the source of that knowledge. It takes our a priori knowledge to be part of our rational nature. Experience may trigger our awareness of this knowledge, but it does not provide us with it. The knowledge is already there.

Plato presents an early version of the Innate Knowledge thesis in the *Meno* as the doctrine of knowledge by recollection. The doctrine is motivated in part by a paradox that arises when we attempt to explain the nature of inquiry. How do we gain knowledge of a theorem in geometry? We inquire into the matter. Yet, knowledge by inquiry seems impossible (*Meno*, 80d-e). We either already know the theorem at the start of our investigation or we do not. If we already have the knowledge, there is no



place for inquiry. If we lack the knowledge, we don't know what we are seeking and cannot recognize it when we find it. Either way we cannot gain knowledge of the theorem by inquiry. Yet, we do know some theorems.

The doctrine of knowledge by recollection offers a solution. When we inquire into the truth of a theorem, we both do and do not already know it. We have knowledge in the form of a memory gained from our soul's knowledge of the theorem prior to its union with our body. We lack knowledge in that, in our soul's unification with the body, it has forgotten the knowledge and now needs to recollect it. In learning the theorem, we are, in effect, recalling what we already know.

Plato famously illustrates the doctrine with an exchange between Socrates and a young slave, in which Socrates guides the slave from ignorance to mathematical knowledge. The slave's experiences, in the form of Socrates' questions and illustrations, are the occasion for his recollection of what he learned previously. Plato's metaphysics provides additional support for the Innate Knowledge Thesis. Since our knowledge is of abstract, eternal Forms which clearly lie beyond our sensory experience, it is a priori.

Contemporary supporters of Plato's position are scarce. The initial paradox, which Plato describes as a "trick argument" (Meno, 80e), rings sophistical. The metaphysical assumptions in the solution need justification. The solution does not answer the basic question: Just how did the slave's soul learn the theorem? The Intuition/Deduction thesis offers an equally, if not more, plausible account of how the slave gains knowledge a priori. Nonetheless, Plato's position illustrates the kind of reasoning that has caused many philosophers to adopt some form of the Innate Knowledge thesis. We are confident that we know certain propositions about the external world, but there seems to be no adequate explanation of how we gained this knowledge short of saying that it is innate. Its content is beyond what we directly gain in experience, as well as what we can gain by performing mental operations on what experience

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provides. It does not seem to be based on an intuition or deduction. That it is innate in us appears to be the best explanation.

Noam Chomsky argues along similar lines in presenting what he describes as a “rationalist conception of the nature of language” (1975, p. 129). Chomsky argues that the experiences available to language learners are far too sparse to account for their knowledge of their language. To explain language acquisition, we must assume that learners have an innate knowledge of a universal grammar capturing the common deep structure of natural languages. It is important to note that Chomsky’s language learners do not know particular propositions describing a universal grammar. They have a set of innate capacities or dispositions which enable and determine their language development. Chomsky gives us a theory of innate learning capacities or structures rather than a theory of innate knowledge. His view does not support the Innate Knowledge thesis as rationalists have traditionally understood it. As one commentator puts it, “Chomsky’s principles ... are innate neither in the sense that we are explicitly aware of them, nor in the sense that we have a disposition to recognize their truth as obvious under appropriate circumstances. And hence it is by no means clear that Chomsky is correct in seeing his theory as following the traditional rationalist account of the acquisition of knowledge” (Cottingham 1984, p. 124).

Peter Carruthers (1992) argues that we have innate knowledge of the principles of folk-psychology. Folk-psychology is a network of common-sense generalizations that hold independently of context or culture and concern the relationships of mental states to one another, to the environment and states of the body and to behavior (1992, p. 115). It includes such beliefs as that pains tend to be caused by injury, that pains tend to prevent us from concentrating on tasks, and that perceptions are generally caused by the appropriate state of the environment. Carruthers notes the complexity of folk-psychology, along with its success in explaining our behavior and the fact that its explanations appeal to such unobservables as beliefs, desires, feelings and thoughts. He argues that the complexity, universality and depth of folk-psychological principles

outstrips what experience can provide, especially to young children who by their fifth year already know a great many of them. This knowledge is also not the result of intuition or deduction; folk-psychological generalizations are not seen to be true in an act of intellectual insight. Carruthers concludes, “[The problem] concerning the child’s acquisition of psychological generalizations cannot be solved, unless we suppose that much of folk-psychology is already innate, triggered locally by the child’s experience of itself and others, rather than learned” (1992, p. 121).

Empiricists, and some rationalists, attack the Innate Knowledge thesis in two main ways. First, they offer accounts of how sense experience or intuition and deduction provide the knowledge that is claimed to be innate. Second, they directly criticize the Innate Knowledge thesis itself. The classic statement of this second line of attack is presented in Locke 1690. Locke raises the issue of just what innate knowledge is. Particular instances of knowledge are supposed to be in our minds as part of our rational make-up, but how are they “in our minds”? If the implication is that we all consciously have this knowledge, it is plainly false. Propositions often given as examples of innate knowledge, even such plausible candidates as the principle that the same thing cannot both be and not be, are not consciously accepted by children and those with severe cognitive limitations. If the point of calling such principles “innate” is not to imply that they are or have been consciously accepted by all rational beings, then it is hard to see what the point is. “No proposition can be said to be in the mind, which it never yet knew, which it never yet was conscious of” (1690, Book I, Chapter II, Section 5, p. 61). Proponents of innate knowledge might respond that some knowledge is innate in that we have the capacity to have it. That claim, while true, is of little interest, however. “If the capacity of knowing, be the natural impression contended for, all the truths a man ever comes to know, will, by this account, be every one of them, innate; and this great point will amount to no more, but only an improper way of speaking; which whilst it pretends to assert the contrary, says nothing different from those, who deny innate principles. For nobody, I think, ever denied,

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that the mind was capable of knowing several truths” (1690, Book I, Chapter II, Section 5, p. 61). Locke thus challenges defenders of the Innate Knowledge thesis to present an account of innate knowledge that allows their position to be both true and interesting. A narrow interpretation of innateness faces counterexamples of rational individuals who do not meet its conditions. A generous interpretation implies that all our knowledge, even that clearly provided by experience, is innate.

Defenders of innate knowledge take up Locke’s challenge. Leibniz responds (1704) by appealing to an account of innateness in terms of natural potential to avoid Locke’s dilemma. Consider Peter Carruthers’ similar reply.

We have noted that while one form of nativism claims (somewhat implausibly) that knowledge is innate in the sense of being present as such (or at least in propositional form) from birth, it might also be maintained that knowledge is innate in the sense of being innately determined to make its appearance at some stage in childhood. This latter thesis is surely the most plausible version of nativism. (1992, p. 51)

Carruthers claims that our innate knowledge is determined through evolutionary selection (p. 111). Evolution has resulted in our being determined to know certain things (e.g. principles of folk-psychology) at particular stages of our life, as part of our natural development. Experiences provide the occasion for our consciously believing the known propositions but not the basis for our knowledge of them (p. 52). Carruthers thus has a ready reply to Locke’s counterexamples of children and cognitively limited persons who do not believe propositions claimed to be instances of innate knowledge. The former have not yet reached the proper stage of development; the latter are persons in whom natural development has broken down (pp. 49–50).

A serious problem for the Innate Knowledge thesis remains, however. We know a proposition only if it is true, we believe it and our belief is warranted. Rationalists who assert the existence of innate knowledge are not just claiming that, as a matter of human evolution, God’s design or

some other factor, at a particular point in our development, certain sorts of experiences trigger our belief in particular propositions in a way that does not involve our learning them from the experiences. Their claim is even bolder: In at least some of these cases, our empirically triggered, but not empirically warranted, belief is nonetheless warranted and so known. How can these beliefs be warranted if they do not gain their warrant from the experiences that cause us to have them or from intuition and deduction?

Some rationalists think that a reliabilist account of warrant provides the answer. According to Reliabilism, beliefs are warranted if they are formed by a process that generally produces true beliefs rather than false ones. The true beliefs that constitute our innate knowledge are warranted, then, because they are formed as the result of a reliable belief-forming process. Carruthers maintains that “Innate beliefs will count as known provided that the process through which they come to be innate is a reliable one (provided, that is, that the process tends to generate beliefs that are true)” (1992, p. 77). He argues that natural selection results in the formation of some beliefs and is a truth-reliable process.

An appeal to Reliabilism, or a similar causal theory of warrant, may well be the best way for rationalists to develop the Innate Knowledge thesis. They have a difficult row to hoe, however. First, such accounts of warrant are themselves quite controversial. Second, rationalists must give an account of innate knowledge that maintains and explains the distinction between innate knowledge and a posteriori knowledge, and it is not clear that they will be able to do so within such an account of warrant. Suppose for the sake of argument that we have innate knowledge of some proposition, P. What makes our knowledge that P innate? To sharpen the question, what difference between our knowledge that P and a clear case of a posteriori knowledge, say our knowledge that something is red based on our current visual experience of a red table, makes the former innate and the latter not innate? In each case, we have a true, warranted belief. In each case, presumably, our belief gains its warrant from the fact that it meets a particular causal condition, e.g., it is

produced by a reliable process. In each case, the causal process is one in which an experience causes us to believe the proposition at hand (that P; that something is red), for, as defenders of innate knowledge admit, our belief that P is “triggered” by an experience, as is our belief that something is red. The insight behind the Innate Knowledge thesis seems to be that the difference between our innate and a posteriori knowledge lies in the relation between our experience and our belief in each case. The experience that causes our belief that P does not “contain” the information that P, while our visual experience of a red table does “contain” the information that something is red. Yet, exactly what is the nature of this containment relation between our experiences, on the one hand, and what we believe, on the other, that is missing in the one case but present in the other? The nature of the experience-belief relation seems quite similar in each. The causal relation between the experience that triggers our belief that P and our belief that P is contingent, as is the fact that the belief-forming process is reliable. The same is true of our experience of a red table and our belief that something is red. The causal relation between the experience and our belief is again contingent. We might have been so constructed that the experience we describe as “being appeared to redly” caused us to believe, not that something is red, but that something is hot. The process that takes us from the experience to our belief is also only contingently reliable. Moreover, if our experience of a red table “contains” the information that something is red, then that fact, not the existence of a reliable belief-forming process between the two, should be the reason why the experience warrants our belief. By appealing to Reliablism, or some other causal theory of warrant, rationalists may obtain a way to explain how innate knowledge can be warranted. They still need to show how their explanation supports an account of the difference between innate knowledge and a posteriori knowledge.

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## 6.6 THE INNATE CONCEPT THESIS

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According to the Innate Concept thesis, some of our concepts have not been gained from experience. They are instead part of our rational make-up, and experience simply triggers a process by which we consciously

grasp them. The main concern motivating the rationalist should be familiar by now: the content of some concepts seems to outstrip anything we could have gained from experience. An example of this reasoning is presented by Descartes in the *Meditations*. Although he sometimes seems committed to the view that all our ideas are innate (Adams 1975 and Gotham 2002), he there classifies our ideas as adventitious, invented by us, and innate. Adventitious ideas, such as a sensation of heat, are gained directly through sense experience. Ideas invented by us, such as our idea of a hippogriff, are created by us from other ideas we possess. Innate ideas, such as our ideas of God, of extended matter, of substance and of a perfect triangle, are placed in our minds by God at creation. Consider Descartes's argument that our concept of God, as an infinitely perfect being, is innate. Our concept of God is not directly gained in experience, as particular tastes, sensations and mental images might be. Its content is beyond what we could ever construct by applying available mental operations to what experience directly provides. From experience, we can gain the concept of a being with finite amounts of various perfections, one, for example, that is finitely knowledgeable, powerful and good. We cannot however move from these empirical concepts to the concept of a being of infinite perfection. ("I must not think that, just as my conceptions of rest and darkness are arrived at by negating movement and light, so my perception of the infinite is arrived at not by means of a true idea but by merely negating the finite," *Third Meditation*, p. 94.) Descartes supplements this argument by another. Not only is the content of our concept of God beyond what experience can provide, the concept is a prerequisite for our employment of the concept of finite perfection gained from experience. ("My perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself. For how could I understand that I doubted or desired—that is lacked something—and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison," *Third Meditation*, p. 94).

An empiricist response to this general line of argument is given by Locke (1690, *Book I*, Chapter IV, Sections 1–25, pp. 91–107). First, there is the

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problem of explaining what it is for someone to have an innate concept. If having an innate concept entails consciously entertaining it at present or in the past, then Descartes's position is open to obvious counterexamples. Young children and people from other cultures do not consciously entertain the concept of God and have not done so. Second, there is the objection that we have no need to appeal to innate concepts in the first place. Contrary to Descartes' argument, we can explain how experience provides all our ideas, including those the rationalists take to be innate, and with just the content that the rationalists attribute to them.

Leibniz (1704) offers a rationalist reply to the first concern. Where Locke puts forth the image of the mind as a blank tablet on which experience writes, Leibniz offers us the image of a block of marble, the veins of which determine what sculpted figures it will accept.

This is why I have taken as an illustration a block of veined marble, rather than a wholly uniform block or blank tablets, that is to say what is called *tabula rasa* in the language of the philosophers. For if the soul were like those blank tablets, truths would be in us in the same way as the figure of Hercules is in a block of marble, when the marble is completely indifferent whether it receives this or some other figure. But if there were veins in the stone which marked out the figure of Hercules rather than other figures, this stone would be more determined thereto, and Hercules would be as it were in some manner innate in it, although labour would be needed to uncover the veins, and to clear them by polishing, and by cutting away what prevents them from appearing. It is in this way that ideas and truths are innate in us, like natural inclinations and dispositions, natural habits or potentialities, and not like activities, although these potentialities are always accompanied by some activities which correspond to them, though they are often imperceptible. (1704, Preface, p. 153)

Leibniz's metaphor contains an insight that Locke misses. The mind plays a role in determining the nature of its contents. This point does not, however, require the adoption of the Innate Concept thesis.



Rationalists have responded to the second part of the empiricist attack on the Innate Concept thesis—the empiricists' claim that the thesis is without basis, as all our ideas can be explained as derived from experience—by focusing on difficulties in the empiricists' attempts to give such an explanation. The difficulties are illustrated by Locke's account. According to Locke, experience consists in external sensation and inner reflection. All our ideas are either simple or complex, with the former being received by us passively in sensation or reflection and the latter being built by the mind from simple materials through various mental operations. Right at the start, the account of how simple ideas are gained is open to an obvious counterexample acknowledged, but then set aside, by Hume in presenting his own empiricist theory. Consider the mental image of a particular shade of blue. If Locke is right, the idea is a simple one and should be passively received by the mind through experience. Hume points out otherwise.

Suppose therefore a person to have enjoyed his sight for thirty years and to have become perfectly acquainted with colors of all kinds, except one particular shade of blue, for instance, which it never has been his fortune to meet with; let all the different shades of that color, except that single one, be placed before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest, it is plain that he will perceive a blank where that shade is wanting and will be sensible that there is a greater distance in that place between the contiguous colors than in any other. Now I ask whether it be possible for him, from his own imagination, to supply this deficiency and raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade, though it had never been conveyed to him by his senses? I believe there are but few will be of the opinion that he can... (1748, Section II, pp. 29–30)

Even when it comes to such simple ideas as the image of a particular shade of blue, the mind is more than a blank slate on which experience writes.

Consider too our concept of a particular color, say red. Critics of Locke's account have pointed out the weaknesses in his explanation of how we

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gain such a concept by the mental operation of abstraction on individual cases. For one thing, it makes the incorrect assumption that various instances of a particular concept share a common feature. Carruthers puts the objection as follows.

In fact problems arise for empiricists even in connection with the very simplest concepts, such as those of colour. For it is false that all instances of a given colour share some common feature. In which case we cannot acquire the concept of that colour by abstracting the common feature of our experience. Thus consider the concept red. Do all shades of red have something in common? If so, what? It is surely false that individual shades of red consist, as it were, of two distinguishable elements a general redness together with a particular shade. Rather, redness consists in a continuous range of shades, each of which is only just distinguishable from its neighbors. Acquiring the concept red is a matter of learning the extent of the range. (1992, p. 59)

For another thing, Locke's account of concept acquisition from particular experiences seems circular.

As it stands, however, Locke's account of concept acquisition appears viciously circular. For noticing or attending to a common feature of various things presupposes that you already possess the concept of the feature in question. (Carruthers 1992, p. 55)

Consider in this regard Locke's account of how we gain our concept of causation.

In the notice that our senses take of the constant vicissitude of things, we cannot but observe, that several particulars, both qualities and substances; begin to exist; and that they receive this their existence from the due application and operation of some other being. From this observation, we get our ideas of cause and effect. (1690, Book II, Chapter 26, Section 1, pp. 292–293)

We get our concept of causation from our observation that some things receive their existence from the application and operation of some other things. Yet, we cannot make this observation unless we already have the

concept of causation. Locke's account of how we gain our idea of power displays a similar circularity.

The mind being every day informed, by the senses, of the alteration of those simple ideas, it observes in things without; and taking notice how one comes to an end, and ceases to be, and another begins to exist which was not before; reflecting also on what passes within itself, and observing a constant change of its ideas, sometimes by the impression of outward objects on the senses, and sometimes by the determination of its own choice; and concluding from what it has so constantly observed to have been, that the like changes will for the future be made in the same things, by like agents, and by the like ways, considers in one thing the possibility of having any of its simple ideas changed, and in another the possibility of making that change; and so comes by that idea which we call power. (1690, Chapter XXI, Section 1, pp. 219–220)

We come by the idea of power though considering the possibility of changes in our ideas made by experiences and our own choices. Yet, to consider this possibility—of some things making a change in others—we must already have a concept of power.

One way to meet at least some of these challenges to an empiricist account of the origin of our concepts is to revise our understanding of the content of our concepts so as to bring them more in line with what experience will clearly provide. Hume famously takes this approach. Beginning in a way reminiscent of Locke, he distinguishes between two forms of mental contents or “perceptions,” as he calls them: impressions and ideas. Impressions are the contents of our current experiences: our sensations, feelings, emotions, desires, and so on. Ideas are mental contents derived from impressions. Simple ideas are copies of impressions; complex ideas are derived from impressions by “compounding, transposing, augmenting or diminishing” them. Given that all our ideas are thus gained from experience, Hume offers us the following method for determining the content of any idea and thereby the meaning of any term taken to express it.

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When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but inquire from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will confirm our suspicion. (1748, Section II, p. 30)

Using this test, Hume draws out one of the most important implications of the empiricists' denial of the Innate Concept thesis. If experience is indeed the source of all ideas, then our experiences also determine the content of our ideas. Our ideas of causation, of substance, of right and wrong have their content determined by the experiences that provide them. Those experiences, Hume argues, are unable to support the content that many rationalists and some empiricists, such as Locke, attribute to the corresponding ideas. Our inability to explain how some concepts, with the contents the rationalists attribute to them, are gained from experience should not lead us to adopt the Innate Concept thesis. It should lead us to accept a more limited view of the contents for those concepts, and thereby a more limited view of our ability to describe and understand the world.

Consider, for example, our idea of causation. Descartes takes it to be innate. Locke offers an apparently circular account of how it is gained from experience. Hume's empiricist account severely limits its content. Our idea of causation is derived from a feeling of expectation rooted in our experiences of the constant conjunction of similar causes and effects. It appears, then, that this idea of a necessary connection among events arises from a number of similar instances which occur, of the constant conjunction of these events; nor can that idea ever be suggested by any one of these instances surveyed in all possible lights and positions. But there is nothing in a number of instances, different from every single instance, which is supposed to be exactly similar, except only that after a repetition of similar instances the mind is carried by habit, upon the appearance of one event, to expect its usual attendant and to believe that it will exist. This connection, therefore, which we feel in the mind, this customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual

attendant, is the sentiment or impression from which we form the idea of power or necessary connection. (1748, Section VII, Part 2, p. 86)

The source of our idea in experience determines its content.

Suitably to this experience, therefore, we may define a cause to be an object followed by another, and where all the objects, similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second... We may, therefore, suitably to this experience, form another definition of cause and call it an object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought of the other. (1748, Section VII, Part 2, p. 87)

Our claims, and any knowledge we may have, about causal connections in the world turn out, given the limited content of our empirically based concept of causation, to be claims and knowledge about the constant conjunction of events and our own feelings of expectation. Thus, the initial disagreement between rationalists and empiricists about the source of our ideas leads to one about their content and thereby the content of our descriptions and knowledge of the world.

Like philosophical debates generally, the rationalist/empiricist debate ultimately concerns our position in the world, in this case our position as rational inquirers. To what extent do our faculties of reason and experience support our attempts to know and understand our situation?

### **Check Your Progress 2**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss about the contribution of Immanuel Kant into the ethical imperial understanding.

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2. Discuss the contribution of Mill.

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## 6.7 LET US SUM UP

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The obvious problem that these radical rationalist strategies face is the need to explain where the mind acquires these innate ideas. In Platos case the solution is an immortal soul-mind that lives through countless lives (i.e., reincarnations), whereas Descartes argues that God places these ideas in human minds. It is also possible to argue that evolution is responsible, i.e., the minds biological structure contains the ideas. While this sounds rather strange, the linguist Noam Chomsky argues this precise thesis. Unless one assumes that certain linguistic structures, e.g., deep grammar, are innate, the argument goes, it is impossible to explain the apparent ease with which human beings learn natural languages.

Immanuel Kant argues a less radical rationalist line. Kant accepts the rationalist claim that reason alone can provide certain knowledge. Nevertheless, Kant also accepts the empiricist claim that all knowledge begins in experience, i.e., without sense experience as the initial data upon which reason can operate, the knowledge acquisition process can never start. Knowledge, as Kant conceives it then is what the mind produces as it orders and structures otherwise chaotic sense data. The rather radical idea here is that it is the mind that imposes the order and structure on the sense data, the implication being that the sense data have no intrinsic order or structure. The main organizational principles that the mind imposes on sense data are its spatial and temporal structure. These

considerations led Kant to a metaphysical distinction the distinction between the noumenal universe and the phenomenal universe. The noumenal universe comprises entities-in-themselves, while the phenomenal universe comprises entities-through-their-appearances (White 1996: 296). This is rather technical so it is best to go through it in stages.

Empiricism denies the rationalist distinction between empirical and a priori knowledge. All knowledge, the empiricist argues, arises through, and is reducible to, sense perception. Thus, there is no knowledge that arises through reason alone.

It is essential to be clear here: it is not reasons existence that empiricism denies, or that reason has a role in knowledge acquisition and manipulation, rather it is that reason has some special access to knowledge over and above the knowledge that experience provides. All empiricists acknowledge that human beings possess reason is the instrument that allows us to manipulate and augment the knowledge that experience provides. Knowledge, however, has its origins in experience rather than in reason.

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## 6.8 KEY WORDS

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**Empiricism:** In philosophy, empiricism is a theory that states that knowledge comes only or primarily from sensory experience. It is one of several views of epistemology, the study of human knowledge, along with rationalism and skepticism

**Rationalism:** In philosophy, rationalism is the epistemological view that "regards reason as the chief source and test of knowledge" or "any view appealing to reason as a source of knowledge or justification".

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## 6.9 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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1. Discuss about Empiricism?
2. Discuss about Rationalism.
3. Discuss about the contribution of Immanuel Kant into the ethical imperial understanding.

4. Discuss the contribution of Mill.

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## 6.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to Check your progress 1

1.
  - a. Empiricism is Simpler: Compared to Empiricism, Rationalism has one more entity that exists: Innate knowledge. According to the Empiricist, the innate knowledge is unobservable and inefficacious; that is, it does not do anything. The knowledge may sit there, never being used. Using Ockham's Razor (= when deciding between competing theories that explain the same phenomena, the simpler theory is better),<sup>1</sup> Empiricism is the better theory.
  - b. Colors: How would you know what the color blue looks like if you were born blind? The only way to come to have the idea of blue is to experience it with your senses. (This objection only works possibly against Plato; see the introduction above again to see why this objection would not faze Descartes, Leibniz, or Chomsky.)
  - c. Imagination and Experience: How can we get the idea of perfect triangularity? We can extrapolate from our experience with crooked, sensible triangles and use our imagination to straighten out what is crooked and see what perfect triangularity is.
  - d. Rationalists have been Wrong about Their "Innate Knowledge": Some medieval rationalists claimed that the notion of a vacuum was rationally absurd and hence it was impossible for one to exist. However, we have shown that it is possible.<sup>2</sup> Reason is not the only way to discover the truth about a matter.
  - e. The Advance of Science: Much of science is founded on empiricist principles, and would not have advanced without it. If we base our conclusions about the world on empiricism, we can change our theories and improve upon them and see our mistakes. A rationalist seems to have to say that we've discovered innate knowledge and then be embarrassed if he or she is ever wrong (see examples such as the vacuum, above).
  - f. All Rationalists do Not Agree about Innate Knowledge: Rationalists claim that there is innate knowledge that gives us

fundamental truths about reality, but even among rationalists (e.g., Plato, who believes in reincarnation and Forms and Descartes, who does not believe in either but does believe in a soul), there is disagreement about the nature of reality, the self, etc. How can this be, if there is innate knowledge of these things?

2.

- a. **Math and Logic are Innate:** Doesn't it seem that mathematical and logical truths are true not because of our five senses, but because of reason's ability to connect ideas?
- b. **Morality is Innate:** How do we get a sense of what right and wrong are with our five senses? Since we cannot experience things like justice, human rights, moral duties, moral good and evil with our five senses, what can the empiricist's ethical theory like? Hume (an empiricist) says morality is based solely on emotions; Locke says experience can provide us with data to show what is morally right and wrong, but does it seem that way to you?
- c. **Verifying Empiricism:** Locke (an empiricist) says that our experiences tell us about the nature of reality, but how can we ever check our experience with what reality really is, in order to know that? Rationalists do not think we can, so we have to rely on reason.
- d. **Poverty of Stimulus Problem:** Three year olds use language in ways that they are not explicitly taught. For example, they form original sentences from words that they haven't heard put together in precisely that way before. Also, they start to understand grammatical rules before they even know what a noun or a verb is. If we can only say what we've heard said by others, how can three year olds speak as well as they do? This is known as the poverty of stimulus problem. You may think that Rationalism is strange, but it does a better job of explaining this problem than Empiricism. One way of choosing which of two theories is better (in addition to or instead of Ockham's Razor – see Empiricism point #1 above) is asking, "Which theory explains the phenomena better?"<sup>1</sup>

- e. **Empiricism Undermines Creativity?** According to Empiricism, you can combine things, separate them, and nothing else. With Rationalism, we come to experience with ready-made tools for creativity. E.g., Plato would say that we're in touch with abstract, immutable realities, which provide lots of material with which to create.
- f. **Controllable Humans?** According to Empiricism, human beings can be controlled and manipulated exceptionally easily. If we are nothing other than what we experience, then we should be able to be made to do whatever we're taught. Rationalism has it that there is an invariable core (call it "human nature") that refuses to be manipulated, which is what makes us unique.

### Answers to Check your progress 2

#### 1. Immanuel Kant:

While Kant thought there was much to admire in the empiricist philosopher David Hume's *A Treatise on Human Nature*, and though he even accepts the empiricist principle that all knowledge arises in experience, Kant is without doubt a rationalist. This rationalism is quite apparent in Kant's philosophical investigations into ethics.

Kant believes that the supreme principle that underlies all moral the categorical imperative must be absolute and universal. Such a principle can never arise in experience, Kant argues, since all experience is particular (i.e., about particular entities in particular situations at particular times). Neither can experience prove this principle. Experience can at best, Kant insists, confirm the categorical imperative.

In contrast to the knowledge that arises through experience, the knowledge that arises through reason is abstract and universal. To illustrate the difference consider the statements "There are wombats in Tasmania" and  $a^2+b^2=c^2$ . It is clear that the empirical statement "There are wombats in Tasmania" is about particular entities (wombats) and a

particular situation (being in Tasmania). The mathematical statement has no such limitations. This statement is abstract in that it mentions no particular entities and universal in that it applies to all appropriate as, bs and cs.

It is reason alone then that is able to determine and prove the categorical imperative as the supreme moral principle. Kant distinguishes here between theoretical reason and practical reason. It is theoretical reason that investigates the empirical universe. This is the reason that science uses. Practical reasons concern is the will, that motive force in human beings that underlies all moral behavior. To be precise, it is practical reasons role to create a good will. To do this practical reason determines the moral principle that the will must follow, i.e., the categorical imperative.

The general epistemological limitations that arise because Kant accepts the empiricist principle that all knowledge begins in experience are also apparent in Kants ethics. Since it is impossible to know entities-in-themselves there are certain entities and ideas, whose importance to ethics are immeasurable, about which human beings can have no knowledge whatsoever. In particular, it is impossible to have knowledge as to whether (1) God exists, (2) the soul is immortal and (3) that human possess free will. Kant argues, however, that even without certain knowledge, it is still essential to assume that all these are true, otherwise ethics is impossible.

## 2. John Stuart Mill:

Mills utilitarian ethics incorporates the radical interpretation that Mill gives the empiricist principle that all knowledge arises in experience. Mill interprets the all to mean all knowledge. Thus, Mill assumes that even mathematical and logical knowledge are empirical knowledge with all the limitations that such knowledge possesses. Mill manages to overcome, however, the scepticism that characterizes Humes empiricism (Encyclopedia of Philosophy 5: 318).

## Notes

The Greatest Happiness Principle that underlies utilitarian ethics states that those actions are moral which provide the greatest happiness to the greatest number. What determines happiness is without a doubt an empirical matter, i.e., it is through our experience that we realize what actions cause the pleasures that increase happiness and what actions cause the pains that decrease happiness.

Reasons role in this process is to learn through these experiences and to formulate the general moral rules that will, over time, lead to the greatest happiness. It is essential to realize, however, that while these general moral rules are meant to guide behavior, because our experiences change, these rules can and do change over time. There are no certain, or absolute, or universal moral rules. Experience is unable to provide such permanence.

Mill also acknowledges, that it is impossible to prove that happiness is the ultimate end that drives all human desire and action. As a consequence Mill must concede, and this is a rather radical concession, that it is impossible to provide a logical demonstration that the Greatest Happiness Principle is the fundamental moral law. Logical analysis, Mill argues, has no place in ethics. In contrast to Locke and Kant then Mill denies that ethics is, or can be, a science. In the end, Mills normative ethics rests upon psychological observations and arguments, whereas Locke and Kant believe their normative theories to rest upon logical arguments.

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# UNIT 7: PROCESS VIEW OF MORALITY

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## STRUCTURE

- 7.0 Objectives
- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Study of Moral Experience
- 7.3 Moral Consciousness
- 7.4 Data for Moral Experience
- 7.5 Philosophical Analysis
- 7.6 Norm for Moral Judgment
- 7.7 Moral Dilemmas
- 7.8 Moral Principles
- 7.9 Moral Sentiments
- 7.10 Dynamics of Moral Experience
- 7.11 Let us sum up
- 7.12 Key Words
- 7.13 Questions for Review
- 7.14 Suggested readings and references
- 7.15 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 7.0 OBJECTIVES

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The major objective of this unit is to introduce the learners to the concept of moral experience in general and guide them to gain an insight in to the philosophical analysis of the main components of moral experience, namely moral consciousness, moral judgment, moral dilemmas, moral principles and moral sentiments. Various theories connected with the norm for moral experience are presented so that there is some clarity with regard to moral decisions. So at the end of this unit, the student will be able:

- To understand moral experience in general

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- To gain a philosophical insight into the various theories of moral judgment
- To have an idea of moral dilemma, moral principle and moral sentiment
- To understand the meaning of dynamics of moral experience.

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## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

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Ethics is a branch of enquiry in Philosophy. It is a treatise which studies human behaviour and determines what is right and wrong behaviour. Another term for ethics is moral philosophy. It attempts to show that there is in human beings a spontaneous and moral awareness and orientation for distinguishing between right or wrong. The capacity for differentiating the mere registration of facts from the meaningfulness of such facts is based on rationality. Ethics does not merely describe the rules of conduct as a positive science but it also aims, as a normative science to show if moral conclusions can serve as objective norms for daily living. The whole of human history may be viewed as a journey in moral experience. Humanity has undertaken this important voyage by a continuous process of moral decisions.

Against this backdrop, 'Moral Experience' includes a wide range of concepts like moral consciousness, moral sense, moral sentiments, moral dilemmas, moral principles and moral judgments. Moral experience investigates all these as human events. Psychological states such as intentions, motives, will, reason, emotions like guilt and shame, moral beliefs and attitudes offer further scope for moral experience. It does not stop with psychology but covers concepts like virtue, character, habit and freedom. Hence moral experience may be studied both as a descriptive and as a normative science.

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## 7.2 STUDY OF MORAL EXPERIENCE

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The Study of Moral experience is motivated by scientific curiosity, a search for explanations of all kinds of moral phenomena, more



specifically as to what is designated as moral experience. However, the study must include the promotion of human welfare. Moral experience is highly contextual and communal. Therefore cultural and social factors play a very important role in the understanding of moral experience. Another significant aspect of moral experience is the moral system which regulates the member of the community. Moral experience is in constant need of revision and improvement in view of public service in a democracy. Individual development of personality always takes place through the study of one's moral experience. Moral sense derives its character from the public context within the larger socio-political and intellectual context. One could argue for moral experience purely on individual conviction. Rejection of external authority and belief in one's own inner light situates moral sense within human nature itself without any reference to any agency or divine will.

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### **7.3 MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

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Moral experience begins with moral consciousness or moral sense. In fact moral consciousness and moral experience are used as synonyms by many. But it is good to distinguish between the two. Experience is a generic term in the sense that whatever affects a person can be called an 'experience'. It can be an emotion like love or hatred. It can be active or passive like love for a friend or love of a friend. One can speak of one's progress in studies as 'knowledge experience.' Any experience leaves behind an impression or memory. Such impressions or memories cumulatively add up to one's experience. The totality of such experiences contributes to the formation of a human personality. However in the experiential process of personality development of an individual, there is always a lack of awareness. It is only when an individual becomes aware of one's latent talents and potentialities of every aspect like mind, heart and will that one could speak of consciousness. As a human experience 'human consciousness' is never total. Even though human consciousness or the self-reflective process of a person is integral to human nature, it is possible to distinguish the contents of the various fields of human consciousness. These fields are normally referred to as 'noetic consciousness', 'aesthetic consciousnesses' and 'moral consciousness'

which highlight the formal objects of Truth, Beauty and Goodness. The formal object of moral consciousness or rectitude deals with what is right and the right thing to do. Rectitude or Goodness is very meaningful word. Careful reflection and calm reasoning is required to understand the implications and importance of the phrase ‘moral goodness’ or ‘moral rectitude’ which constitutes the major component of moral experience. The passage from moral experience to moral consciousness may very well be compared with the entry point of an airport and the myriad runways on the tarmac. It is again like going from the merely implicit background opaque experience to the explicit foreground of enlightened consciousness. So far, it has been dim, vague and unthematic. Henceforth it would be clear, plain and thematic.

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## **7.4 DATA FOR MORAL EXPERIENCE**

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At this juncture, a remark is necessary as to what is specific or ‘subjective’ experience of a particular individual and what makes for the general or ‘objective’ experience of every person. A study of the moral experience of others obtained from public contact with them and a careful study of moral history would throw light on the question of the data of moral experience. The most immediate primary data of moral experience are actions which are good and which are done by everyone and the actions which are bad and which are avoided by everyone. The scholastic tenet that ‘the good is to be done and the evil to be avoided’ is the principle of common sense. Humans come to the awareness of this distinction through the process of socialization, influence and education. Some good actions are absolute, some are conditional and some others are optional in practice. Similarly some bad actions are avoided absolutely while others are avoided conditionally. A sense of obligation or constraint is the result of the feeling of ‘should’ or ‘should not’. Moral experience is based on a moral choice or freedom to comply with the sense of obligation or constraint. Moral obligation becomes objective in the sense that an individual finds oneself as ‘obligated’ even before any moral decision. It comes to express a universal application. The second aspect of moral experience is that what is right must be done because it is right to do it and it is an end in itself and avoid what is

wrong and must be avoided. The sense of satisfaction when the right thing is done and the sense of guilt when a wrong thing is done is another important datum of moral experience. The right action gets approval and praise while the wrong action invites condemnation and blame.

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## 7.5 PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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A philosophical understanding of moral experience invites us to explore the meaning of terms such as ‘good or bad’, ‘right or wrong’. There are different approaches to moral experience. Linguistic analysis of moral experience serves as a useful method to understand moral problems. Meta-ethical theories like logical positivism, emotivism and intuitionism do not actually solve ethical problems but contain very precious insights for understanding moral experience, particularly with regard to moral ideal or moral value which cannot be reduced to non-moral value. Moral experience is made up of specific moral actions. Moral actions issue from moral values. And the totality of moral values can be called the moral order. What is the foundation for moral experience? Do humans build such a foundation? Is it universal? How do the humans come to know such a foundation? The first two questions are explicit and the latter are implicit. Humans as beings with a conscience are dynamic, always becoming and in the making, transparent, undetermined and indefinable. They become the foundation of moral experience. If Humans as social beings are the immediate domain of moral experience, then interrelatedness becomes the foundation for moral order and experience. This interrelatedness operates at three levels namely, a relatedness with an absolute being, a relatedness with other humans and a relatedness with the infra-human world. For the moment, the relation with the Absolute as religious value is kept aside.

The other two relations play a significant role in moral experience. Expression of moral sentiments towards the infra-human world is analogous in the sense that one’s attitudes towards animals and plants are similar to one’s attitudes towards fellow human beings. Only the relation with other humans serves as the primary sphere of moral experience. Actions in this domain become morally qualifiable and quantifiable. The

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social dimension is a constitutive aspect of the human order. Humans are not merely ‘social animals’ but are bound by ‘social contract’ as well. The human interrelatedness serves as the foundation for moral experience, human rights and duties. While the believer considers the foundation of moral order to be God, there are others who take human relatedness and freedom to be the foundation of the moral order.

### Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What do you understand by moral experience?

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2) Why is natural law universally valid?

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## 7.6 NORM FOR MORAL JUDGMENT

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Once the foundation for moral experience is established, the question about the criterion for moral judgment arises. Moral judgments must be based on ‘norms, rules, standards or criteria. Ethical history has proposed ethical theories which are founded on ethical principles. A cursory view of these norms would shed some light on moral judgment. These theories may generally be classified as teleological (from the Greek word, ‘telos-end’) and deontological (from the Greek word ‘deon-that which is binding, duties). Teleological theories propound ‘ethical egoism’, represented by hedonism of Epicurus and Thomas Hobbes, ‘eudemonism’ of Aristotle and ‘ethical altruism’ or Utilitarianism represented by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

### TELEOLOGICAL THEORIES

**Epicurus** (4th century BC) looks at pleasure as the motivating power of moral experience and indeed as the end of human life. Pleasure is not the present transitory sensation. It lasts throughout a life time. Pleasure consists in the absence of pain than in positive gratification. It is preeminently serenity of soul or repose (atarxia). Virtue is necessary condition for serenity. Vices produce pain and are an impediment to the acquisition of the serenity of the soul. The highest virtue is phronesis, the prudential art of calculating and measuring pleasure and pain. Epicurean norm is self-centred and hedonistic. What is conducive to the purpose becomes the norm of moral judgment.

**Thomas Hobbes** (1588-1679AD) explains all kinds of experiences, namely physiological, emotional, intellectual and volitional in terms of physical motion. Pleasure sets in motion all these of events while pain impedes them. It is reasonable to aim at pleasure for self-preservation which also implies that humans must endeavour to establish peace among themselves which is the first law of nature. Along with this, humans must be willing to forego their claim to have everything. These laws of nature are dictates of reason which govern moral judgment and moral experience. Thus there is openness to social consciousness and civil law in the social utilitarianism of Hobbes. His norm for moral judgment can be interpreted as self-preservation or civil law. Civil law aims at the common good. His insight is that moral good is based on human interrelatedness. Both these theories are termed as 'ethically hedonistic'.

**Aristotle** (384 BC) states that every thing aims at perfection as the 'good'. In the attainment of perfection, humans achieve happiness. The highest good consists in the attainment of perfect exercise of properly human activities. These human activities are moral and intellectual virtues. Virtue is the mean or middle between two extremes, (e.g.) courage is the mean between foolhardiness and cowardice. Virtue is a constant disposition of the soul. While moral virtues perfect the will, intellectual virtues perfect the mind. Aristotle lists five intellectual virtues. 1) the art of know-how (tekne-later technology)

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2)prudence(phronesis) 3) demonstrative reason(episteme) 4)intuitive reason(nous) and 5) wisdom(sophia). The cardinal moral virtues are: 1) courage, 2) temperance, 3) justice and 4) wisdom. In the philosophical contemplation of wisdom, does consist the supreme goodness and perfect happiness. Hence practice of virtues becomes the norm of moral judgement.

**Jeremy Bentham** (1748-1832AD) a major figure in the history of ethics emphasizes utility, which is that property in any object whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good and happiness to the party whose interest is considered. The British utilitarian movement originated with Bentham since it was he who applied the utilitarian principle to civil legislation and morals for the first time. It is measured by the degree of conduciveness to the greater happiness of the greatest number of humans. He states that humans are moved to action by the attraction of pleasure and the repulsion of pain. By pleasure he not only means sensual pleasure but also aesthetic, intellectual and benevolent satisfaction. His famous 'felicific calculus' enables humans to decide what concrete action to perform or avoid so as to find the greatest amount of happiness. Any moral action results in happiness based on the following seven factors. 'the intensity of pleasure, its duration, its certainty or uncertainty, its propinquity or remoteness, its fecundity of further pleasurable sensations, its purity from unpleasant sensations, and its extent or number of people affected. The norm of moral judgement is pleasure understood in the light of his 'measure of utility'. Bentham's ideas represent personal utilitarianism.

**John Stuart Mill** (1806-1873AD) is even more explicit than Bentham when he states that 'the general principle to which all rules of practice ought to conform and the test by which they should be tried is that of the conduciveness to the happiness of mankind or rather of all sentient beings'. He defines utility as the 'Greatest Happiness Principle' as the foundation of moral experience. Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness he means pleasure and the absence of pain.

According to Mill, what humans desire immediately is not their personal happiness but common happiness. Besides there is not only a quantitative difference between pleasures but also a qualitative one. And it is virtue which is conducive to common happiness. He associates the utility principle with the notion of justice. The norm of moral judgement in the case of Mill would be the 'conscientious feelings of mankind'. Hence Mill may be designated as representative of social utilitarianism.

## DEONTOLOGICAL THEORIES

The second set of moral theories is deontological which lays stress on duty or obligation. The norm for moral judgement is based on the 'rightness' of a moral duty. Deontological theories like the Divine Voluntarism of Ockham and Moral Positivism of Durkheim speaks of moral norm as extrinsic to moral experience. But the Cosmism of the Stoics, the Moral Sense of Shaftsbury, the Formal Rationalism of Kant, the Right Reason of Thomas Aquinas and the Human Nature of Suarez locate the moral norm as intrinsic to moral experience.

**William of Ockham** (1290-1349AD): Divine freedom and omnipotence play an important role in Ockham's thought. Since moral order like the created order is contingent, what is good or bad is in such a way as God commands or forbids it. By an absolute power God has established a definite moral order and it is not likely to be changed. He speaks of 'right reason' and any morally good will, a moral virtue or a virtuous act is always in conformity to it. Indeed for an act to be a virtuous act, not only must it conform to right reason but also it must be performed simply because it is good. It appears that on the one hand he posits the absolute will of God as the foundation, norm and source of moral experience and on the other he proposes 'right reason' at least as the proximate norm of morality. According to Ockham, the ultimate and sufficient reason to follow right reason is God's will.

**Emile Durkheim** (1858-1917AD) For Durkheim, morality is a social phenomenon. Society is not the sum of individuals but it is a kind of

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ideal. This ideal or 'collective conscience' of the group is the source of religious and moral ideals. So morality has a social function and it consists in the help it gives the individual to adapt themselves to live harmoniously with the mores of the group. The norm for moral judgment would be precisely these mores of one's social group. Collective thought becomes the norm for the truth or falsehood. This kind of thinking in ethics is called 'Moral Positivism'.

**The Stoics** (4th cent BC onwards) According to the Stoics, reality consists of two principles, one is active and the other passive which stand one to the other as the soul to the body. Good and evil are two necessary parts, each subserving the perfection of the whole cosmos. All human actions are necessitated by fate. Virtue consists in one's internal conformity to the logos, or the cosmic order. Virtue is the only good for humans desirable in and for itself and vice is its own punishment. Humans are social beings and as citizens of the cosmos they must live according to the Logos.

**Lord Shaftesbury** (1671-1713AD) As an ardent admirer of Aristotle, Shaftesbury insists on the social nature of humans. Self-love as distinct from selfishness can be consistent with and contribute to love of others or benevolence. Rectitude or virtue is the harmony of one's passions and affections under the control of the reason both with regard to oneself and with regard to others. The emphasis is laid on character rather on actions. Virtue must be sought for its own sake. His theory of 'moral sense' states that every human is capable of perceiving moral values and distinguishing between virtues and vices. Moral concepts are connatural to humans but he admits that moral sense may be darkened by bad customs and education.

**Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804AD) Kant is a landmark in the history of morality. Moral knowledge does not depend exclusively on experience but contains a priori elements like necessity and universality. But Kant attempts to show that these elements originate in practical reason. He understands by practical reason the choices made in accordance with the



moral law. He discovers in practical reason the nature of moral obligation. The ultimate basis of moral law cannot be anything else but pure practical reason itself. It is Kantian rationalism. Kant starts with an analysis of the idea of 'good will'. He discovers that a good will is a will which acts for the sake of duty alone. It acts out of reverence for the moral law. It acts because duty is duty. Moral law itself is the source of moral obligation. He further proceeds to formulate the universal form as the principle to serve as the criterion for the moral judgment. Kant calls this universal form of the moral law as the 'categorical imperative'. The possible ground for categorical imperative must be an end which is absolute and not relative. For Kant the supreme good is virtue, which is nothing but making one's will accord perfectly with the moral law. No other philosopher has brought out better than he, the nature of the moral obligation, its independence of empirical experience and its foundation in reason.

**Thomas Aquinas** (1224-1274AD) The most prominent Christian philosopher and theologian of the Middle Ages speaks of God as the ultimate cause of everything. A certain plan and order exists in the mind of God which he calls the 'Eternal Reason' or the Eternal Law. As manifest in creation, he calls it the 'Natural Law' which can be known through human reason. Any act that conforms to the plan of God is good; otherwise it is bad. The ultimate end of man is God personalistically conceived. Human reason is the proximate homogenous norm of moral experience.

**Francis Suarez** (1548-1617AD) The eternal law is a free decree of the will of God who lays down an order to be followed. The principles of the natural law are self-evident and therefore known immediately and intuitively by all normal human beings. For Suarez the moral good consists in the conformity to human nature that is to rational nature as such. Human reason is seen as a capacity to distinguish between acts which are conformed to human nature from those which are not. And hence human reason not only becomes the foundation of moral experience but also its standard. The teleological theories approach moral

experience and moral values as good, namely, the good of the humans. The deontological theories approach moral experience and moral values as a right, namely the obligation of the humans. There is a relation of reciprocity between the good and the right. While the norm of the good is an ideal for the humans, the norm of the right is moral consciousness itself. As human interrelatedness is the immediate ontological foundation of the moral order and love is the existential foundation, the basis of moral activity, the norm for moral judgement has to be located in the golden mean of Confucius, ‘do not do to others what you do not want others do to you’, the golden rule of the New Testament, ‘do to others what you want others do to you’ or in the categorical imperative of Kant, ‘so act as to treat humanity whether in your own person or in that of any other always and at the same time as an end and never merely as a means’ The norm of morality is constitutive of a person’s self-actualization as a social being and its practical principle for moral judgment is the principle of universal love. Theory and practice together form what is called moral experience.

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### **7.7 MORAL DILEMMAS**

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The term ‘Moral dilemma’ is applied to any difficult moral problem. Dilemmas raise hard moral questions. In the context of relevance of morality, moral philosophers state moral dilemma when one moral reason conflicts with another. Moral reasons normally conflict with religious or aesthetic reasons. But moral dilemmas occur only when there is conflict between two moral reasons. A moral reason is a moral requirement just in case it would be morally wrong not to act on it without an adequate justification or excuse. E.g. X holds a weapon for Y; then X has a moral reason to return it when asked for. But if X feels that Y would commit a heinous crime with the weapon, then X has moral reason not to return the weapon.

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### **7.8 MORAL PRINCIPLES**

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Normally a person of moral principle is associated with a fixed set of rules that ignores the complexities of the situation and fails to adapt

one's behaviour to changing circumstances. The morality of principles is contrasted with the morality of sensibility which lays stress on virtue as sympathy and integrity. But a general sense of moral principle indicates some factor that is generally relevant to what ought to be done. Moral principles can then be regarded as statements picking out those factors of situations that can be appealed to as moral reasons. Correctness of universal moral principles is taken as a condition of the correctness of particular moral judgments. Ultimate moral principles and their correctness is a necessary condition of the correctness of all other moral judgments. Without some ultimate moral principles, moral judgments cannot be justified.

That one discerns features and qualities of some situation that are relevant to sizing it up morally does not yet imply that one explicitly or even implicitly employs any general claims in describing it. Perhaps all that one perceives are particularly embedded features and qualities, without saliently perceiving them as instantiations of any types. Sartre's student may be focused on his mother and on the particular plights of several of his fellow Frenchmen under Nazi occupation, rather than on any purported requirements of filial duty or patriotism. Having become aware of some moral issue in such relatively particular terms, he might proceed directly to sorting out the conflict between them. Another possibility, however, and one that we frequently seem to exploit, is to formulate the issue in general terms: "An only child should stick by an otherwise isolated parent," for instance, or "one should help those in dire need if one can do so without significant personal sacrifice." Such general statements would be examples of "moral principles," in a broad sense. (We do not here distinguish between principles and rules. Those who do include Dworkin 1978 and Gert 1998.)

We must be careful, here, to distinguish the issue of whether principles commonly play an implicit or explicit role in moral reasoning, including well-conducted moral reasoning, from the issue of whether principles necessarily figure as part of the basis of moral truth. The latter issue is best understood as a metaphysical question about the nature and basis of

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moral facts. What is currently known as moral particularism is the view that there are no defensible moral principles and that moral reasons, or well-grounded moral facts, can exist independently of any basis in a general principle. A contrary view holds that moral reasons are necessarily general, whether because the sources of their justification are all general or because a moral claim is ill-formed if it contains particularities. But whether principles play a useful role in moral reasoning is certainly a different question from whether principles play a necessary role in accounting for the ultimate truth-conditions of moral statements. Moral particularism, as just defined, denies their latter role. Some moral particularists seem also to believe that moral particularism implies that moral principles cannot soundly play a useful role in reasoning. This claim is disputable, as it seems a contingent matter whether the relevant particular facts arrange themselves in ways susceptible to general summary and whether our cognitive apparatus can cope with them at all without employing general principles. Although the metaphysical controversy about moral particularism lies largely outside our topic, we will revisit it in section 2.5, in connection with the weighing of conflicting reasons.

With regard to moral reasoning, while there are some self-styled “anti-theorists” who deny that abstract structures of linked generalities are important to moral reasoning (Clarke, et al. 1989), it is more common to find philosophers who recognize both some role for particular judgment and some role for moral principles. Thus, neo-Aristotelians like Nussbaum who emphasize the importance of “finely tuned and richly aware” particular discernment also regard that discernment as being guided by a set of generally describable virtues whose general descriptions will come into play in at least some kinds of cases (Nussbaum 1990). “Situation ethicists” of an earlier generation (e.g. Fletcher 1997) emphasized the importance of taking into account a wide range of circumstantial differentiae, but against the background of some general principles whose application the differentiae help sort out. Feminist ethicists influenced by Carol Gilligan’s path breaking work on moral development have stressed the moral centrality of the kind of care

and discernment that are salient and well-developed by people immersed in particular relationships (Held 1995); but this emphasis is consistent with such general principles as “one ought to be sensitive to the wishes of one’s friends”(see the entry on feminist moral psychology). Again, if we distinguish the question of whether principles are useful in responsibly-conducted moral thinking from the question of whether moral reasons ultimately all derive from general principles, and concentrate our attention solely on the former, we will see that some of the opposition to general moral principles melts away.

It should be noted that we have been using a weak notion of generality, here. It is contrasted only with the kind of strict particularity that comes with indexicals and proper names. General statements or claims – ones that contain no such particular references – are not necessarily universal generalizations, making an assertion about all cases of the mentioned type. Thus, “one should normally help those in dire need” is a general principle, in this weak sense. Possibly, such logically loose principles would be obfuscatory in the context of an attempt to reconstruct the ultimate truth-conditions of moral statements. Such logically loose principles would clearly be useless in any attempt to generate a deductively tight “practical syllogism.” In our day-to-day, non-deductive reasoning, however, such logically loose principles appear to be quite useful. (Recall that we are understanding “reasoning” quite broadly, as responsibly conducted thinking: nothing in this understanding of reasoning suggests any uniquely privileged place for deductive inference: cf. Harman 1986. For more on defeasible or “default” principles, see section 2.5.)

In this terminology, establishing that general principles are essential to moral reasoning leaves open the further question whether logically tight, or exceptionless, principles are also essential to moral reasoning. Certainly, much of our actual moral reasoning seems to be driven by attempts to recast or reinterpret principles so that they can be taken to be exceptionless. Adherents and inheritors of the natural-law tradition in ethics (e.g. Donagan 1977) are particularly supple defenders of

exceptionless moral principles, as they are able to avail themselves not only of a refined tradition of casuistry but also of a wide array of subtle – some would say overly subtle – distinctions, such as those mentioned above between doing and allowing and between intending as a means and accepting as a byproduct.

A related role for a strong form of generality in moral reasoning comes from the Kantian thought that one's moral reasoning must counter one's tendency to make exceptions for oneself. Accordingly, Kant holds, as we have noted, that we must ask whether the maxims of our actions can serve as universal laws. As most contemporary readers understand this demand, it requires that we engage in a kind of hypothetical generalization across agents, and ask about the implications of everybody acting that way in those circumstances. The grounds for developing Kant's thought in this direction have been well explored (e.g., Nell 1975, Korsgaard 1996, Engstrom 2009). The importance and the difficulties of such a hypothetical generalization test in ethics were discussed the influential works Gibbard 1965 and Goldman 1974.

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## 7.9 MORAL SENTIMENTS

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Moral sentiments are a subset of affective phenomena like feelings, dispositions and attitudes that are more or less intimately related to moral phenomena. Moral sentiments are varied and result in different responses to moral phenomena. There are cognitivist and non cognitivist theories of emotion which also apply to moral sentiments. Cognitivists (Nussbaum: 2001) identify emotions with evaluative judgments. Noncognitivists (William James: 1842-1910) view emotions are essentially felt experiences different in kind from that of beliefs and judgments. Contemporary noncognitivists (Prinz: 2004) believe that sentiments are not properly amenable to assessment in terms of truth or falsehood. Philosophers have debated the role of moral sentiment in moral deliberations and judgments, moral motivation and moral responsibility. Today moral philosophers are especially concerned with the role of moral sensibility, a capacity for experiencing or disposition to experience feelings, emotions, honour, pride and shame relative to the role of

reason. Philosophical interest in the affective aspects of one's moral experience is not limited to any epoch like the moral developments in the 18th century British moral philosophy. Right from the early Greek thought, one finds a concern with the place of feelings, emotions and affective attitudes generally in the constitution and care of the psyche or soul. For Plato and Aristotle human excellence requires that one's soul is properly constituted in the relation of the rational, desiderative and appetitive parts- the latter comprising the domain of sentiments and emotions. Proper constitution of the soul is an achievement of the harmony among all the three. All affects of the soul have ethical import even if they do not have ethical content.

The Theory Of Moral Sentiments was a real scientific breakthrough. It shows that our moral ideas and actions are a product of our very nature as social creatures. It argues that this social psychology is a better guide to moral action than is reason. It identifies the basic rules of prudence and justice that are needed for society to survive, and explains the additional, beneficent, actions that enable it to flourish.

Self-interest and sympathy. As individuals, we have a natural tendency to look after ourselves. That is merely prudence. And yet as social creatures, explains Smith, we are also endowed with a natural sympathy – today we would say empathy – towards others. When we see others distressed or happy, we feel for them – albeit less strongly. Likewise, others seek our empathy and feel for us. When their feelings are particularly strong, empathy prompts them to restrain their emotions so as to bring them into line with our, less intense reactions. Gradually, as we grow from childhood to adulthood, we each learn what is and is not acceptable to other people. Morality stems from our social nature.

Justice and beneficence. So does justice. Though we are self-interested, we again have to work out how to live alongside others without doing them harm. That is an essential minimum for the survival of society. If people go further and do positive good – beneficence – we welcome it, but cannot demand such action as we demand justice.

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Virtue. Prudence, justice, and beneficence are important. However, the ideal must be that any impartial person, real or imaginary – what Smith calls an impartial spectator – would fully empathise with our emotions and actions. That requires self-command, and in this lies true virtue.

Morality, says Smith, is not something we have to calculate. It is natural, built into us as social beings. When we see people happy or sad, we feel happy or sad too. We derive pleasure when people do things we approve of, and distress when we believe they are doing harm.

Of course, we do not feel others' emotions as strongly as they do. And through our natural empathy with others, we learn that an excess of anger, or grief, or other emotions distresses them. So we try to curb our emotions to bring them into line with those of others. In fact, we aim to temper them to the point where any typical, disinterested person – an impartial spectator, says Smith – would empathise with us.

Likewise, when we show concern for other people, we know that an impartial spectator would approve, and we take pleasure from it. The impartial spectator is only imaginary, but still guides us: and through experience we gradually build up a system of behavioural rules – morality.

Punishments and rewards have an important social function. We approve and reward acts that benefit society, and disapprove and punish acts that harm it. Nature has equipped us with appetites and aversions that promote the continued existence of our species and our society. It is almost as if an invisible hand were guiding what we do.

Justice. For society to survive, there must be rules to prevent its individual members harming each other. As Smith comments, it is possible for a society of robbers and murderers to exist – but only insofar as they abstain from robbing and murdering each other. These are the rules we call justice.



If people do not help others when they could, or fail to return a good deed, we may call them uncharitable or ungrateful. But we do not punish people to force them to do good: only for acts of real or intended harm. We force them only to obey the rules of justice, because society could not otherwise survive.

Conscience. But nature has given us something even more immediate than punishment, namely our own self-criticism. We are impartial spectators, not only of other people's actions, thanks to conscience. It is nature's way of reminding us that other people are important too.

Moral rules. In the process of making such judgements on a countless number of actions, we gradually formulate rules of conduct. We do not then have to think out each new situation afresh: we now have moral standards to guide us.

This constancy is beneficial to the social order. By following our conscience, we end up, surely but unintentionally, promoting the happiness of mankind. Human laws, with their punishments and rewards, may aim at the same results; but they can never be as consistent, immediate, or effective as conscience and the rules of morality engineered by nature.

Virtues. Smith ends *The Theory Of Moral Sentiments* by defining the character of a truly virtuous person. Such a person, he suggests, would embody the qualities of prudence, justice, beneficence and self-command.

Prudence moderates the individual's excesses and as such is important for society. It is respectable, if not endearing. Justice limits the harm we do to others. It is essential for the continuation of social life. Beneficence improves social life by prompting us to promote the happiness of others. It cannot be demanded from anyone, but it is always appreciated. And self-command moderates our passions and reins in our destructive actions.

Freedom and nature, Smith concludes, are a surer guide to the creation of a harmonious, functioning society than the supposed reason of philosophers and visionaries.

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### **7.10 DYNAMICS OF MORAL EXPERIENCE**

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In the evolutionary vision of the human community, the question of universal validity of moral norm raises questions. The dynamic becoming of the human order relativizes any absolute norm for moral experience. Authors like Charles Darwin (1809-1882AD), Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955AD) Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950AD) with much evidence from biology, science and philosophy emphasize the dynamic and changing consciousness of the human and corresponding moral order. Hence the structure of moral experience must be understood in the sense of what constitutes the constant of moral experience and what makes the variable. While moral consciousness in a univocal sense remains the constant, immediate data in an absolute manner, the same moral consciousness in specific and particular contexts of the moral law becomes the relative norm of moral experience. While metaphysical certitude is possible and is in fact existentially operative with regard to the immediate data of moral experience, moral certitude is sufficient with regard to the specifications of the moral law.

In addition to posing philosophical problems in its own right, moral reasoning is of interest on account of its implications for moral facts and moral theories. Accordingly, attending to moral reasoning will often be useful to those whose real interest is in determining the right answer to some concrete moral problem or in arguing for or against some moral theory. The characteristic ways we attempt to work through a given sort of moral quandary can be just as revealing about our considered approaches to these matters as are any bottom-line judgments we may characteristically come to. Further, we may have firm, reflective convictions about how a given class of problems is best tackled, deliberatively, even when we remain in doubt about what should be

done. In such cases, attending to the modes of moral reasoning that we characteristically accept can usefully expand the set of moral information from which we start, suggesting ways to structure the competing considerations.

Facts about the nature of moral inference and moral reasoning may have important direct implications for moral theory. For instance, it might be taken to be a condition of adequacy of any moral theory that it play a practically useful role in our efforts at self-understanding and deliberation. It should be deliberation-guiding (Richardson 2018, §1.2). If this condition is accepted, then any moral theory that would require agents to engage in abstruse or difficult reasoning may be inadequate for that reason, as would be any theory that assumes that ordinary individuals are generally unable to reason in the ways that the theory calls for. J.S. Mill (1979) conceded that we are generally unable to do the calculations called for by utilitarianism, as he understood it, and argued that we should be consoled by the fact that, over the course of history, experience has generated secondary principles that guide us well enough. Rather more dramatically, R. M. Hare defended utilitarianism as well capturing the reasoning of ideally informed and rational “archangels” (1981). Taking seriously a deliberation-guidance desideratum for moral theory would favor, instead, theories that more directly inform efforts at moral reasoning by we “proletarians,” to use Hare’s contrasting term.

Accordingly, the close relations between moral reasoning, the moral facts, and moral theory do not eliminate moral reasoning as a topic of interest. To the contrary, because moral reasoning has important implications about moral facts and moral theories, these close relations lend additional interest to the topic of moral reasoning.

One advantage to defining “reasoning” capaciously, as here, is that it helps one recognize that the processes whereby we come to be concretely aware of moral issues are integral to moral reasoning as it might more narrowly be understood. Recognizing moral issues when they arise requires a highly trained set of capacities and a broad range of emotional

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attunements. Philosophers of the moral sense school of the 17th and 18th centuries stressed innate emotional propensities, such as sympathy with other humans. Classically influenced virtue theorists, by contrast, give more importance to the training of perception and the emotional growth that must accompany it. Among contemporary philosophers working in empirical ethics there is a similar divide, with some arguing that we process situations using an innate moral grammar (Mikhail 2011) and some emphasizing the role of emotions in that processing (Haidt 2001, Prinz 2007, Greene 2014). For the moral reasoner, a crucial task for our capacities of moral recognition is to mark out certain features of a situation as being morally salient. Sartre's student, for instance, focused on the competing claims of his mother and the Free French, giving them each an importance to his situation that he did not give to eating French cheese or wearing a uniform. To say that certain features are marked out as morally salient is not to imply that the features thus singled out answer to the terms of some general principle or other: we will come to the question of particularism, below. Rather, it is simply to say that recognitional attention must have a selective focus.

What will be counted as a moral issue or difficulty, in the sense requiring moral agents' recognition, will again vary by moral theory. Not all moral theories would count filial loyalty and patriotism as moral duties. It is only at great cost, however, that any moral theory could claim to do without a layer of moral thinking involving situation-recognition. A calculative sort of utilitarianism, perhaps, might be imagined according to which there is no need to spot a moral issue or difficulty, as every choice node in life presents the agent with the same, utility-maximizing task. Perhaps Jeremy Bentham held a utilitarianism of this sort. For the more plausible utilitarianisms mentioned above, however, such as Mill's and Hare's, agents need not always calculate afresh, but must instead be alive to the possibility that because the ordinary "landmarks and direction posts" lead one astray in the situation at hand, they must make recourse to a more direct and critical mode of moral reasoning. Recognizing whether one is in one of those situations thus becomes the principal recognitional task for the utilitarian agent. (Whether this task

can be suitably confined, of course, has long been one of the crucial questions about whether such indirect forms of utilitarianism, attractive on other grounds, can prevent themselves from collapsing into a more Benthamite, direct form: cf. Brandt 1979.)

Note that, as we have been describing moral uptake, we have not implied that what is perceived is ever a moral fact. Rather, it might be that what is perceived is some ordinary, descriptive feature of a situation that is, for whatever reason, morally relevant. An account of moral uptake will interestingly impinge upon the metaphysics of moral facts, however, if it holds that moral facts can be perceived. Importantly intermediate, in this respect, is the set of judgments involving so-called “thick” evaluative concepts – for example, that someone is callous, boorish, just, or brave (see the entry on thick ethical concepts). These do not invoke the supposedly “thinner” terms of overall moral assessment, “good,” or “right.” Yet they are not innocent of normative content, either. Plainly, we do recognize callousness when we see clear cases of it. Plainly, too – whatever the metaphysical implications of the last fact – our ability to describe our situations in these thick normative terms is crucial to our ability to reason morally.

It is debated how closely our abilities of moral discernment are tied to our moral motivations. For Aristotle and many of his ancient successors, the two are closely linked, in that someone not brought up into virtuous motivations will not see things correctly. For instance, cowards will overestimate dangers, the rash will underestimate them, and the virtuous will perceive them correctly (Eudemian Ethics 1229b23–27). By the Stoics, too, having the right motivations was regarded as intimately tied to perceiving the world correctly; but whereas Aristotle saw the emotions as allies to enlist in support of sound moral discernment, the Stoics saw them as inimical to clear perception of the truth (cf. Nussbaum 2001).

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## 7.11 LET US SUM UP

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Humans in search of realization base their moral experience in the ontological foundation of moral obligation which is nothing but human

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interrelatedness and the norm for moral good is nothing but the social character of the human community. Moral precepts and sentiments as selfevident factors regulate moral experience. By continuously becoming human and moral persons and progressively developing human and moral consciousness, moral experience is particularized and concretized. This process involves both moral intuition and reflection on human and moral experience. Love is the form of all moral precepts and norms.

### Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Name some of the important ethical theories.

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2) Write a short note on moral sentiments.

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## 7.12 KEY WORDS

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**Moral consciousness:** Moral consciousness or rectitude deals with what is right and the right thing to do.

**Moral dilemmas:** Moral dilemmas occur only when there is conflict between two moral reasons. A moral reason is a moral requirement just in case it would be morally wrong not to act on it without an adequate justification or excuse.

**Moral sentiments:** Moral sentiments are a subset of affective phenomena like feelings, dispositions and attitudes that are more or less intimately related to moral phenomena. Moral sentiments are varied and result in different responses to moral phenomena.

**Moral Principle:** A general sense of moral principle indicates some factor that is generally relevant to what ought to be done.

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## 7.13 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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- 1) What do you understand by moral experience?
- 2) Why is natural law universally valid?
- 3) Name some of the important ethical theories.
- 4) Write a short note on moral sentiments.

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## 7.14 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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- Bonar, James. *Moral Sense*. New York: Macmillan, 1930.
- Daiches, Raphael. *The Moral Sense*. London: Oxford University Press, 1947
- Durkheim, E. *Sociology and Philosophy*. Glencoe: Free Press, 1953
- Stuart, Henry. *Moral Experience: An Outline of Ethics for Class Teaching*. London: Sanborn Press, 2007

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## 7.15 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to Check Your Progress 1

1. Moral experience begins with moral consciousness or moral sense. In fact moral consciousness and moral experience are used as synonyms by many. But it is good to distinguish between the two. Experience is a generic term in the sense that whatever affects a person can be called an 'experience'. It can be an emotion like love or hatred. It can be active or passive like love for a friend or love of a friend. One can speak of one's progress in studies as 'knowledge experience'. Any experience leaves behind an impression or memory. Such impressions or memories cumulatively add up to one's experience. The totality of such experiences contributes to the formation of a human personality.

2. A philosophical understanding of moral experience invites us to explore the meaning of terms such as 'good or bad', 'right or wrong'.

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There are different approaches to moral experience. Linguistic analysis of moral experience serves as a useful method to understand moral problems. Meta-ethical theories like logical positivism, emotivism and intuitionism do not actually solve ethical problems but contain very precious insights for understanding moral experience, particularly with regard to moral ideal or moral value which cannot be reduced to non-moral value. Moral experience is made up of specific moral actions. Moral actions issue from moral values. And the totality of moral values can be called the moral order.

### Answers to Check Your Progress 2

1. These theories may generally be classified as teleological (from the Greek word, 'telos-end') and deontological (from the Greek word 'deon-that which is binding, duties). Teleological theories propound 'ethical egoism', represented by hedonism of Epicurus and Thomas Hobbes, 'eudemonism' of Aristotle and 'ethical altruism' or Utilitarianism represented by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

2. Moral sentiments are a subset of affective phenomena like feelings, dispositions and attitudes that are more or less intimately related to moral phenomena. Moral sentiments are varied and result in different responses to moral phenomena. There are cognitivist and non cognitivist theories of emotion which also apply to moral sentiments. Cognitivists (Nussbaum: 2001) identify emotions with evaluative judgments. Noncognitivists (William James: 1842-1910) view emotions are essentially felt experiences different in kind from that of beliefs and judgments. Contemporary noncognitivists (Prinz: 2004) believe that sentiments are not properly amenable to assessment in terms of truth or falsehood. Philosophers have debated the role of moral sentiment in moral deliberations and judgments, moral motivation and moral responsibility. Today moral philosophers are especially concerned with the role of moral sensibility, a capacity for experiencing or disposition to experience feelings, emotions, honour, pride and shame relative to the role of reason.