

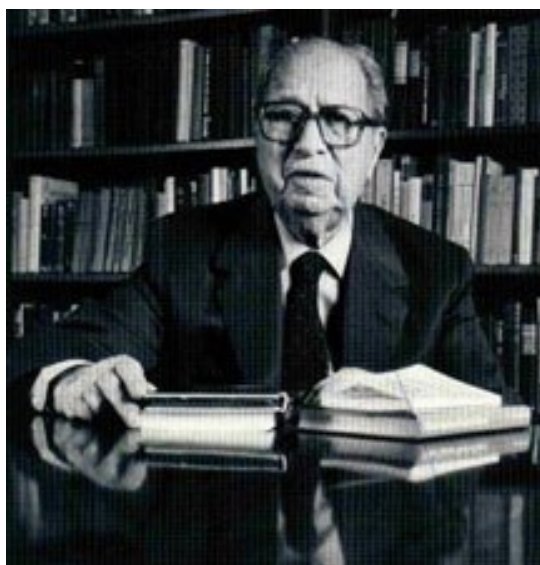
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“Metaphysics” is a word that Aristotle’s editors invented to name books he wrote that came after his books on physics. These later books deal with the modes of being or existence, with the reality that is independent of our minds and is immaterial or non-physical. Unlike mathematics, metaphysics does not deal with ideal objects abstracted from the realm of physical things. It deals with the immaterial, such as God and the human intellect. Aristotle sometimes refers to it as theology; today we would call it philosophical theology.

—Mortimer Adler



METAPHYSICS: WHAT THERE IS IN REALITY

MORTIMER ADLER

PART 1 OF 2

Immanuel Kant, in his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, as well as in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, outlawed the enterprise with which this chapter will be engaged.

He thought he had succeeded in proving that the questions appropriate to metaphysical inquiry were beyond solution by the processes of rational thought, as indeed they were, *if* Kant’s understanding of the human cognitive powers was correct, which it was not. Metaphysics does deal with transempirical matters, certainly beyond the scope of inquiries within the realm of experience

constituted by Kant's forms of sensitive intuition and his categories of the understanding. Kant invented them to accommodate scientific inquiry, but they were ill-suited for the purpose of metaphysics concerned with a reality independent of our minds, which Kant declared unknowable.

According to Kant, the three great problems of metaphysics were (1) the existence of God, (2) the freedom of the will, and (3) the immortality of the soul. Neither Plato nor Aristotle in antiquity would have thought that this was the case, though Aristotle would have included philosophical theology in his book *Metaphysics*. In the Middle Ages, the great theologians would have followed Aristotle in defining metaphysics as the study of being and the modes of being, which, of course, included the being of God.

In any case, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, under the heading of "Transcendental Dialectic," Kant sets forth the antinomies in which he shows that the arguments pro and con appear to be valid, and since they are contradictory, they cannot be sound.

Thus we see that Kant is not only the father of all the varieties of idealism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also the father of nineteenth- and twentieth-century positivism, for whom the term "metaphysics" stood for all unfounded and unfindable philosophical speculation.

2

Another modern obstacle to sound metaphysical thinking is the dogmatic materialism so prevalent in modern times. Materialism is, of course, of ancient origin—in Greece with the atomism of Leucippus and Democritus, and in Rome with that of Epicurus and Lucretius. The early modern exponents of materialism are Thomas Hobbes and Julien La Mettrie, the latter the mechanistic disciple of Descartes.

The fundamental thesis of materialism is that nothing exists in reality except atoms and the bodies composing them. We can substitute for atoms all the elementary particles that physical science has discovered in this century. Another way of stating the fundamental thesis of materialism is that nothing exists in reality that is not a body, elementary or composite, or waves, or fields of energy.

The crucial word in this statement is "nothing." A quotation from the *Leviathan* of Thomas Hobbes may illustrate this point—the exclusion or denial of anything immaterial or incorporeal. Hobbes

proposes the materialistic, view that words have meaning only when they refer to physical existences—bodies perceptible to the senses or detectable by sensitive instruments. He writes:

... if a man should talk to me of ... *immaterial substances*, or of a *free subject* ... I should not say he were in an error but that his words were without meaning—that is to say, absurd.¹

The dogmatism involved in this, or any similar statement by a materialist, lies in the negative assertion that the immaterial—the incorporeal, the nonphysical—does not exist. The existence of sensible bodies, our own or any other, does not have to be proved. The affirmation of their existence is inseparable from our perceptual apprehension of them. But the denial that the immaterial exists *cannot* be proved. It is certainly not self-evident. Therefore, when it is asserted, it is sheer dogmatism.

Whether the existence of immaterial entities, such as God, the angels, and the human intellect, *can* be proved is another question. But the inquiry into their existence is certainly not foreclosed by dogmatic materialism.

Scientists in the twentieth century are for the most part materialists. They are not shocked, as I am, by Hawking's statement that what cannot be measured by physicists does not exist in reality. That statement by Hawking is not a scientific mistake. It is, as any other statement of the materialistic doctrine is, a false statement in philosophy.

The words "spirit" and "spiritual" name the opposites of the "material" and "corporeal." But we have no positive understanding of their meaning; we can only understand them negatively by using such words as "immaterial" and "incorporeal."

3

Affirming the existence of an independent reality, philosophers in the Middle Ages distinguished *entia reale* from *entia rationis*. By the latter they meant those objects of thought that existed only in the mind, not in reality. They might have been called fictions of the mind. They included such things as mermaids, centaurs, and unicorns, as well as all the characters in poetic narratives as contrasted with the persons appearing in historical narrations.

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part I, Chapter V.

This distinction between *entia rationis* and *entia reale* must not be confused with the distinction between subjective and objective existence. Obviously, Antigone and Hamlet are not subjective; nor are Caesar and Napoleon. The first two are fictions of the mind and the last two are historical persons that during some past time existed in reality, and now exist in the memory.

Anything that can be a common object of conversation between two persons has objective existence, though it may not have existence in reality. What exists subjectively—exists for me alone—are my bodily feelings and my perceptions, memories, imaginations, and conceptions. We can talk to others about them, but they cannot share our experiences of them. These have real existence, even though their existence must always be understood as an aspect or attribute of my own real existence. What exists subjectively cannot exist apart from me. Its existence, however, is real because my own existence is a part of reality.

Careful consideration of these matters requires us to introduce a third mode of existence, that is (1) neither the real existence of entities that have their existence entirely independent of all human minds (2) nor the subjective existence of the contents or aspects of my mind. The latter are entities that have existence in reality because, as my attributes, they exist whether I am thinking about them or not. Their real existence is not independent of the real existence of my mind but is independent of my thinking about them.

What is this third and intermediate mode of existence—intermediate between what is totally independent of my mind and any other mind and that which has real existence because my mind is a part of my own existence in reality? To answer this question I must first explain the difference between instrumental and formal signs. The words of any language are instrumental signs. They exist as visible physical marks on paper or, when spoken, as audible sounds. These physical notations are at first meaningless, and as such, they still exist physically. They acquire meaning, have a plurality of meanings, and can change their meaning from time to time.

In sharp contrast are the cognitive contents of our minds—our percepts, memories, images, and concepts. They are never meaningless; they do not acquire meaning; they do not have a plurality of meanings, and they cannot change their meaning from time to time. Each of the entities named *is* a meaning; and being a meaning, it is self-effacing, presenting to the mind the object it intends or signifies.

If we were directly conscious of our percepts and concepts, instead of being directly conscious of the objects they intend or signify, they would not *be* meanings. They themselves would be objects. For them to *be* meanings and *have* objects, we must be conscious only of the objects that they signify or intend when they function as meanings.

We can now answer the question posed a few paragraphs ago. Though you and I cannot talk about your concept of liberty or mine, since each is private mental content, we can talk to each other about the common object that your concept of liberty and mine signifies. Liberty is a common object of our thought, even though it is signified by two concepts, mine privately in my mind, and yours privately in your mind. You are not conscious of my concept even when you are talking about liberty as an object of thought, any more than I am conscious of my own concept of liberty when I discuss the same object of thought with you. We could not talk about it if it were not a common object of thought.

What kind of existence do such objects of thought have? It cannot be real existence, for it is not totally independent of the mind. Nor can it be the kind of subjective existence that is an aspect of my own existence in reality. Because it exists as a result of being intended or meant by the formal signs that exist as cognitive contents in your mind and mine, let us call it intentional existence.

That which exists intentionally is always something that can be an object of thought for two or more minds. Its existence is not totally independent of minds at work. About objects of thought, except for perceptual objects, we must always ask: Does it exist in reality as well as an object of thought?

In my book *Some Questions About Language*, I think I fully explained the intermediate character of intentional objects or objects of thought that enables us to talk to one another, both about things that exist in reality and things that may not. Let me quote here the paragraphs that set forth the explanation:

Were there no middle ground or third alternative, it would be difficult to characterize a mode of existence distinct from real existence and mental existence; but there is an alternative and a middle ground. Stated negatively, it consists (i) in not being dependent on the acts of any particular human mind, and in this respect it differs from mental existence; and (ii) in not being independent of the human mind in general, or of all particular

minds, and in this respect it differs from real existence. It is a mode of existence that depends on there being some minds at work, but not on the acts of any particular mind. If there were no minds at all in the universe, there would still be things having real existence, but there would be no apprehended objects. If this or that particular mind were not in existence and operative, its subjective ideas would not exist, but there would still be objects apprehended by other minds.

Three men are looking at the moon and talking about it. The moon they are looking at is one and the same really existent thing in the physical universe; and the content of their conversation indicates that it is one and the same perceived object that they are talking about. It is an object for each of them because each has a percept of it. Three men; three percepts; three quite distinct mental existences; but the three percepts are the same in intention; that is, while three in number, they are, natural signs having the same significance, and hence the same signifycate the moon as object. If that were not so, three men looking at the moon could not have one and the same apprehended object as a common object of reference to talk about.

Continuing with this example, let us now suppose that one of the three men walks away. The really existent moon is totally unaffected; but the same is equally true of the apprehended moon that is the object referred to in the continuing conversation of the other two men. Even if a second of the three men should walk away and the conversation ceased, the moon as a perceived object of the one remaining man would still be unaffected; it would still be an object that he could talk about to a fourth man, should that fourth individual come up a moment later and engage in conversation about it. The fact that the apprehended moon is a common object of discourse for any two men at a given time indicates that it can be a common object of discourse again at a later time for another pair of men. If there were no men at all on earth, the moon would still continue to exist in reality, but there would be no apprehended moon. The moon as a perceptual object depends for its special mode of existence on the operation of one or more minds, but on none in particular.

What this example teaches us holds for any other object that can be a common object of apprehension and of verbal reference for two or more minds. It holds for Hamlet and Julius Caesar, for horses and centaurs, for angels and electrons, for events remembered as well as for events perceived, and for ob-

jects of imagination and of thought as well as for objects of perception.

Let us consider another example which involves a remembered object that three men are talking about. The three were some time ago among the pallbearers at the funeral of a mutual friend. They are now discussing the fittings of the casket they carried then. They are in agreement that the fittings were bronze. The casket, as a physical thing, was something that all three of them laid hold of; it was one and the same thing for all three of them. The casket, as an object now being remembered, is also common—one and the same object for all three of them. If, during the funeral, one of them had taken his hands off the casket and walked away, that physical thing would have been considerably affected by his physical removal, whereas the remembered casket would not be at all affected if one of the three men who are engaged in conversation about it were to leave the group and the conversation were then continued by the remaining two.

I have characterized the mode of existence that belongs to apprehended objects, which are also objects of discourse, but I have not yet assigned a name to it. In view of the fact that ideas are natural signs which signify, refer to, or intend objects as their natural referents or significates, it would seem appropriate to speak of the mode of existence possessed by objects as *intentional* existence. What was said earlier about subjective ideas (that they *are* meanings; that their very nature *is* to signify) can now be restated by saying that ideas are intentions of the mind. Their intentionality consists in their having significates or objects. Objects, as intended or signified, have intentional existence.

Let me now summarize the threefold distinction in modes of existence which has emerged. I. *Real* existence (i.e., the existence possessed by things) is that mode of being which is totally independent of mind—independent of mind in general and of any particular mind. II. *Mental* existence (i.e., the existence possessed by subjective ideas) is that mode of being which is totally dependent on the acts of a particular mind. III. *Intentional* existence (i.e., the existence possessed by apprehended objects or objects of discourse) is that mode of being which is dependent on mind in general—dependent on the acts of some particular minds, but not dependent on the acts of any one particular mind.²

² Some Questions About Language, pp. 88-90.

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