

The metaphysical impulse

A while ago, in my introductory philosophy course, we had reached the section dealing with metaphysics. I tried to explain to my students what metaphysics is by mentioning a variety of problems which traditionally have been regarded as falling within that area. Among these problems is the nature of space and time, and I began to recount the fascination, and in some instances the bewilderment, a variety of persons have felt through the centuries in contemplating the concepts of space and time. I recounted to my students how Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus, 95-52 BC)¹ wondered what would happen if a person were at the ‘end of space’ and hurled a spear. Where would it go? If there really were an edge to space, then there would have to be more space beyond; but if there were no edge, space would have to go on ‘forever’. Either way – Lucretius reasoned – one could never actually *be* at the edge of space, and so Lucretius argued to the conclusion that space, as he put it, “goes on and has no bounds”.²

... there can be no end to anything
without something beyond to mark that end
and show where nature and sense³ can go no further.
... if we should theorize that the whole
of space were limited, then if a man ran out
to the last limits and hurled a spear,
would you prefer that, whirled by might and muscle,
the spear flew on and on, as it was thrown,
or do you think something would stop and block it?

1. The dates of most persons mentioned in this book are listed in the Names Index, pp. 427-32.

2. Later, in footnote 3, p. 151, I will say a bit more about his argument.

3. I.e. sensory perception

One or the other you must assume and grant.
 But either cuts off escape and forces you
 to grant that the All goes on and has no bounds.
 For whether your spear is checked and stopped by something
 from tracing its path and landing at its goal,
 or flies free, where it started was not the end.
 So it will go: no matter where you spot
 the end, I'll ask, "What happens to my spear?"
 ([127], 23-4)

I recounted, too, to my students how the teenaged Martin Buber (1878-1965), twenty centuries later, in adopting the same sort of vivid imagery as Lucretius's, was driven to despair and to the brink of insanity.

... what stirs and terrifies ... [man] ... is not the ... infinity of space ... It is the fact that, by the impression of infinity, any concept of space, a finite no less than an infinite, becomes uncanny to him, for really to try and imagine finite space is just as hazardous a venture as really to try and imagine infinite space, and makes man just as emphatically conscious that he is not a match for the world. When I was about fourteen years of age I myself experienced this in a way which has deeply influenced my whole life. A necessity I could not understand swept over me: I had to try again and again to imagine the edge of space, or its edgelessness, time with a beginning and an end or a time without beginning or end, and both were equally impossible, equally hopeless – yet there seemed to be only the choice between the one or the other absurdity. Under an irresistible compulsion I reeled from one to the other, at times so closely threatened with the danger of madness that I seriously thought of avoiding it by suicide. ([37], 135-6)

And I told the students, too, how I myself as a youngster, knowing nothing of Lucretius or Buber, would often wonder – like countless others before me and doubtless countless more in the future – about these same problems. Even as a child, I resolved to write a book about these problems. Today, I remember only the resolve; I have totally forgotten what I thought I might write. That forgetfulness is probably all for the best. For I am sure that if I could remember my childhood ruminations on these problems, they would embarrass me by their

naivety and youthful exuberance. In any event, I recounted all this to my students, and then found myself asking how many of them, too, had harbored similar wonderment and perplexity.

About half the class raised their hands and we got to talking. It turned out, as I suspected, that many of them had wondered about such matters. But a surprise lay with the other half of the class. As we talked, some of the latter group confided that they had never, ever thought about the matter. They told us that as they looked up at the stars on cloudless nights (and that they all did, from time to time), they never found themselves wondering how big the universe was – whether finite or infinite – or whether space ‘went on forever’ or ‘stopped somewhere out there’. I am afraid that my response, after hearing several of them profess such uninterest, was “How can you *not* think about such things!?”

Two days later, in one of the tutorial groups in that same course, one of my students objected to my remark. She wrote me a note which reads, in part: “One of the reasons why I have failed to worry about such problems as where space ends or when did time begin is because I prefer to concern myself with dilemmas that have relevance to life right now. There are many current crises that require immediate attention ... This ... point of view may make me appear ignorant of intellectual thought but I don’t feel comfortable worrying ... [whether] the universe expanded last night because whether it did or not, I can still function the same as I did yesterday.” It was clear that this woman had been put on the defensive by my unfortunate manner of expression “How can you *not* think about such things!?” I say “unfortunate” because it had certainly not been my intention to berate those who do not share my concern with such problems. I was not suggesting – as this student thought I was – that everybody *ought* to be fascinated by such puzzles. Instead I was merely expressing my own surprise at, not my objection to, other persons’ not being seduced by these problems. Once again, this time to explain the thrust of my remark, I found myself recounting to my students still another piece of personal history.

When I was in my early twenties, I dated a woman who, on our third date, happened to mention that she did not like chocolate. My response on that earlier occasion had been identical, save for the last phrase. For I had said to her: “How can you *not* like chocolate!?” I certainly was not finding fault with her. There is no fault in someone’s not liking chocolate. Nor is it that I thought that she should like it or that if she would just give herself a chance, she would learn to like it.

Nothing of the sort. I was simply amazed that her reactions could be so dissimilar to my own. So, too, it is with metaphysics.

All of us, whether trained in philosophy or not, subscribe to a great variety of metaphysical theories. Some of us, however, are predisposed to examine these theories, to probe their strong and weak points, to hold them up for comparison with alternative theories, and sometimes to abandon one in favor of another. Some persons – like myself and many, but not all, of my students – find themselves pondering metaphysical questions without being provoked or goaded to do so. We just do it naturally. Others come to find such problems interesting when they find their friends and teachers talking about them. And still others find no particular interest or reward in examining the merits of the metaphysical views they hold, and grow impatient with the exercise of intellectual self-examination. You may already know into which category you yourself fall. But for some of you, philosophy will come as a new challenge, and you may find the uncovering and the analyzing of your own world-view a fascinating route to self-discovery.

What do I mean when I say that each of us, whether professional philosopher or not, holds a great variety of metaphysical theories? I will try to illustrate with a few examples. The exercise will serve to begin to illuminate what a metaphysical theory is.⁴

Metaphysical theories inform world-views, and by this I mean not just that they shape what we say about the world, or what we might believe about the world, but that they affect our actions, our reactions, and our emotions. To this extent, they resemble religious views, but unlike religious views, there need not be any supernatural component to them, and unlike religious views, they invite critical scrutiny and revision.

It is surprising that metaphysical theories which may resist being judged true or false by empirical, or experiential methods, i.e. which

4. Traditionally philosophy has been regarded as having four main divisions: Metaphysics; Epistemology (Theory of Knowledge); Logic; and Value Theory (incorporating both Aesthetics and Ethics). But these historical partitions within philosophy are not immutable; they are mere conveniences. Many problems and methods, particularly in the twentieth century, crisscross several of these areas. Although my concern in this book is principally with metaphysics, occasionally the discussion will touch upon areas customarily regarded as lying outside of metaphysics.

have no *testable* consequences, may, nonetheless, have profound *practical* consequences. Buber, as we have already seen, contemplated suicide because he could not see his way through a metaphysical puzzle. Indeed, he probably did not even realize that he had unwittingly subscribed to a bad (conceptually bad, not of course morally bad) metaphysical *theory*. His mistake, I will argue later in this book, was very basic: he conceived of space as if it were similar to familiar physical objects, i.e. as if it were similar to the sorts of things which have a surface and which are located at a place. He saw his way out of the puzzle, finally, only by casting off the one metaphysical theory in favor of another. It is interesting to note that he was rescued by discovering a book of metaphysics, and thereby coming to realize that his was, after all, a metaphysical conundrum. Picking up the passage I quoted just above and now continuing, we find:

Under an irresistible compulsion I reeled from one to the other, at times so closely threatened with the danger of madness that I seriously thought of avoiding it by suicide. Salvation came to the fifteen year old boy in a book, Kant's *Prolegomena to all Future Metaphysics*, which I dared to read although its first sentence told me that it was not intended for the use of pupils but for future teachers. This book showed me that space and time are only the forms in which my human view of what is, necessarily works itself out; that is, they were not attached to the inner nature of the world, but to the nature of my senses. ([37], 136)

Fortunately Buber believed he had solved the puzzle and was able to cease agonizing over it. Kant's theory at least had the virtue of convincing Buber that space itself is not to be likened to objects in space. But as it turns out, Kant's was not the only alternative theory then available, at the end of the nineteenth century, which could have solved Buber's problem. There was, in fact, another theory also available, one which I regard as vastly superior to Kant's, but Buber either did not know of that theory or found it less convincing. In any event, later in this book I will offer a solution to Buber's problem modeled after the theory, not of Kant (1724-1804), but of Leibniz, who had flourished (1646-1716) in the century before Kant.

For a second example let us turn from concerns about the end of space to one about the end of life. One of the most troubling problems confronting modern society has been the realization of the scope of,

and the devastation to families that is wrought by, Alzheimer's disease. Many an unfortunate older woman, herself suffering failing health and often having meager financial means, is faced with the terrible burden of caring for a husband dying of Alzheimer's disease. There can be few greater human tragedies. For as the disease progresses the patient is able less and less to respond *in a human fashion* to the ministrations, the care, and the love of his own suffering wife. In the last, most horrible days of the disease, the patient is unable even to thank his benefactors, or even to recognize them, and finally unable even to talk to them. The patient falls into what is sometimes brutally, but aptly, called "a vegetative state".

How the wife and the family react to this unfolding tragedy is to a great extent determined by which metaphysical theory of personhood they subscribe to. More often than not, families are unaware that their actions in such circumstances are informed by anything as grand-sounding as 'a metaphysical theory', but their actions and attitudes really are.

What, after all, is it to *be* a person? Is the dying, semiconscious patient 'really' a person? Beliefs*⁵ differ. Some families go through their grieving process midway through the course of the illness. At some point, even months perhaps before the patient is pronounced clinically dead, the family might say something of the sort, "Father is gone; all that is left is the shell of his body." When clinical death follows months later, the members of such a family experience relief, not grief. But other families react in a totally different way. Up until the moment of clinical death they regard the patient as 'husband' and as 'father', and will permit themselves to grieve only after the clinical death. It is not just the time of grieving which differs in the two cases. There may well be resentment and anger in the latter case where the family has for years felt themselves obliged to cater to the bodily needs of the ailing patient, often at a terrible sacrifice in their own lives. The wife may be consumed with enormous guilt. After all, she pledged, and she takes her pledge seriously, to "cleave to her husband unto death". But when, exactly, does a person die? Is it *just* a figure of speech to say – as some families do – at some point, long before the

5. Terms having distinctive meanings within philosophy and technical terms which may be unfamiliar to the nonspecialist reader have been flagged on their first appearance with an asterisk and are explained in the Glossary, pp. 397-407.

clinical death of the body, that an Alzheimer's patient is dead?

Which account of personhood one subscribes to can have profound effects on one's own attitudes, on one's sense of obligation, and on one's own measure of self-worth when one finds oneself entrusted to care for an Alzheimer's patient. "I pledged myself to care for my husband 'unto death'. Is this wracked body which used to be that of my husband still my husband? Or has my husband already died, and am I the victim of a cruel joke of Nature, left to care for this vegetative body as if he were still alive? Am I a wife or a widow? Is this my husband or merely his breathing body? I married and swore my love and care to a person, but is this a person? How far does my obligation to care and love go? If his body were not breathing, he would be dead. But this body is merely breathing; there is no recognition, there is no human response, there is nothing reciprocated. Is my husband dead?" Few of us, mercifully, are in positions where these questions are forced on us. And thus few of us actually go through such exercises of mulling over the alternative answers.

Sometimes persons who find themselves caring for vegetative patients are unaware (as was Buber, albeit in a very different sort of case) that they do subscribe to a particular metaphysical theory. They simply unthinkingly, unreflectingly either believe that the patient has died or believe that the patient has not died. They take their belief from their own parents, or their church, or their friends. They fail to realize that the matter is not so clear-cut, that it can be argued what the proper attitudes should be, that it cannot either be simply assumed that the person has died or be simply assumed that the person has not died. In short, what answers one gives to such questions, and what attitudes one takes in getting through one's day if one is forced to care for an Alzheimer's victim, depend on what particular metaphysical theory of personhood one subscribes to. And it is remarkably easy to subscribe to one theory or another without even an inkling that one *is* subscribing to a metaphysical theory, one which, almost certainly, many other persons, just as matter-of-factly, reject. But we need not be in the dark about these remarkably different beliefs and attendant attitudes. It is possible to become aware that our own views about what a person is constitute a *theory*, not a settled 'fact', and are thus open to examination, to critical probing, and to revision if not outright replacement.⁶

6. Even persons who are not clinically ill can change so much as to make identity problematic. "When [television newscaster Jessica] Savitch's end

These two problems, the one concerning the end of space, the other the end of life, seem at the outset to have virtually nothing in common. Even the appearance of the word “end” in the statement of the two problems is more of an accident than a genuine commonality, for the term is equivocal. In the first case “end” means something like “boundary” or “edge”, while in the latter it means “cessation” or “extinction”. And yet, there is a remarkable connection between these two problems.

For both problems, as we will see later, intimately concern the concept of a physical (material) body. Does space exist independently of the objects (material bodies), e.g. the stars, planets, and comets, which are said to ‘occupy space’? Are persons anything other than certain kinds of physical objects, viz. living human bodies? Are persons, that is, to be *identified* with their bodies, or are persons conceptually distinct from their bodies? The two problems, one about the nature of space, the other about the nature of personhood, come together in requiring that one attend to the concept of what it is to be a physical object (material body). But while there is this common feature in both these problems, certainly not all metaphysical problems share this particular commonality.

Still another instance where a metaphysical theory informs our world-view occurs in the case of our judging the proper response to a person’s wrongdoing. Some determinists believe that punishment is never warranted. Such persons believe that whatever a person does is determined by that person’s genetic makeup and environment, where “environment” is understood broadly to include *all* the stimuli which impinge on that person. But if these are *all* the ‘determiners’ of a person’s behavior, and if neither your genetic makeup nor the stimuli which assail you are of your choosing, then there can be no sense in which you are responsible for your own actions. And thus someone who subscribes to this particular theory will argue that punishment, to the extent that it is retributive and not rehabilitative, is never morally justified.⁷

finally came in a freak car accident in 1983, one close friend had already finished mourning: the Jessica she had once known had died years before” ([220], 63).

7. I have argued in [201], chapters 10-11, that this particular version of determinism assumes a certain account of the nature of physical laws, and that if that account is abandoned, then the conclusion that we are never responsible

Can one really believe such a theory? It certainly appears that the famed trial lawyer Clarence Darrow (1857-1938) did.

Every one knows that the heavenly bodies move in certain paths in relation to each other with seeming consistency and regularity which we call [physical] law. ... No one attributes freewill or motive to the material world. Is the conduct of man or the other animals any more subject to whim or choice than the action of the planets? ... We know that man's every act is induced by motives that led or urged him here or there; that the sequence of cause and effect runs through the whole universe, and is nowhere more compelling than with man. ([53], 76-7)

The principal thing to remember is that we are all the products of heredity and environment; that we have little or no control, as individuals, over ourselves, and that criminals are like the rest of us in that regard. ([52], 15; quoted by permission)

Darrow often used such arguments in the murder cases he defended. In the mouth of such a skillful and theatrical orator, these metaphysical arguments seem to have been highly persuasive, for never once in his long career did he lose a client to the death penalty.

The impact of metaphysical theories is not reserved exclusively for such momentous issues as the extent of the universe, the nature of personhood, and the existence of free will. Metaphysical theories inform our behavior, as well, in what might be regarded as the mundane.

A person who believes in souls and who believes that pain is of moral consequence only in a creature with a soul, and who believes that animals lack souls, may believe that it is morally permissible to kill animals without trying to lessen their pain. Nowadays many of us are repelled by the idea of causing an animal needless pain. But such attitudes have not been the historical norm. Even nowadays many persons who would be appalled at someone's inflicting injury on a dog may not give a moment's heed to catching a trout by means of a barbed hook in the creature's mouth. The familiar justification for the difference in attitude is often summed up in the formula: "Fish are cold-blooded creatures and cold-blooded creatures do not feel pain."

for our actions does not follow. I will not, however, explore these issues further in this book.

In part, but only in part, is the verdict on whether or not fish feel pain a scientific one. Science can tell us how highly developed is a fish's central nervous system. What science cannot possibly tell us is to what extent any creature feels pain.⁸

What, if anything, makes this diverse sample of puzzles metaphysical? It is important to recognize that there need be no answer to this question other than tradition. There may, that is, be many metaphysical problems which bear little more in common than that they are *regarded* as metaphysical puzzles. To this extent, "metaphysical" may be like "interesting" or "popular" or "taboo", i.e. the term may describe something extrinsic, a way of our regarding the thing described, rather than any intrinsic feature of the thing itself. It may well be that there is no way other than by giving examples to explain what is to be regarded as a metaphysical puzzle.

If this is true, there should be no cause for alarm. For if this is true, metaphysics is no worse off in this regard than is, for example, mathematics. There is no single determinate feature, other than tradition, which makes some puzzle or some technique a mathematical one. When certain persons at the end of the sixteenth century set their minds to developing what has come to be known as algebra, many mathematicians did not know what to make of the newly developing techniques and body of knowledge ([112], 122-6). Was algebra, or was it not, mathematics? Or, again, at the turn of the twentieth century, as set theory was being developed at the hands of a few mathematicians, it was being roundly condemned by others ([112], 203-4). Was set theory a genuine part of mathematics or not? Mathematicians, without of course ever taking a vote on the question, but rather just by their accepting and using algebra and set theory, collectively decided (not discovered!) that these new techniques and their attendant concepts were to be regarded as mathematical. Similarly today there is a debate among physical anthropologists whether 'forensic archaeology' is a bona fide discipline alongside forensic anthropology.⁹ There is no court of appeal to address one's questions to, to settle such dis-

8. For a taste of just *some* of the many problems involved in trying to understand the consciousness of nonhuman creatures, see Thomas Nagel's "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" ([140]).

9. One anthropologist, revealing his hostility, has characterized forensic archaeologists as "'fringe' elements who analyze ceramics from vandalized sites" (reported in [98], 2).

ciplinary disputes. Nowhere is it authoritatively written what is, and what is not, to count as being mathematical; nowhere is it written what is, and what is not, to count as falling within the sphere of forensic anthropology. And – to make the point I am driving at – nowhere is it, nor could it be, authoritatively written what is, and what is not, to count as being a metaphysical problem.

This is not to say, however, that anything and everything is eligible for being regarded as being a metaphysical problem. No more so than is everything eligible for being regarded as being a mathematical or an anthropological problem.

To what extent, then, can we say what a metaphysical problem is, or put another way, what metaphysics itself is? There is no simple answer. The scope of metaphysics changes somewhat from generation to generation (remember the quotation [p. 6] from Collingwood, speaking of history); it may even change from philosopher to philosopher. I think it would be foolhardy to attempt to give anything like a definition or some formula whose application would give a verdict: “Yes, this is a metaphysical problem”; or, “No, this is not a metaphysical problem”. To learn what metaphysics is, or better, what sorts of problems philosophers regard as being metaphysical problems, one should look into a variety of philosophical books. And in doing that, one will quickly discover that a great many, remarkably diverse, problems are regarded as being metaphysical ones.

This essential vagueness must be terribly unsatisfactory for the newcomer. There is always the expectation that one should be told at the outset what the nature and scope is of the studies to be pursued. Actually, I have tried to anticipate this presumption with the preceding examples. But doubtless some of you would like something more by way of characterization. So, bearing in mind the warnings I have just given about the hazards and indeed the futility of the attempt, let me say just a little bit more about what metaphysics might be regarded to be. But understand that whatever anyone could say at this point could be nothing more than a kind of signpost.

Human beings come equipped with several sensory modes. Aristotle (384-322 BC) thought we had exactly five: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling.¹⁰ So venerated was his philosophy that this

10. See [10], book III, 424b20-3. Aristotle not only thought that there were exactly five senses, he thought that it was provable that there could not be any more than five (see 424b24-425a14).

wildly wrong opinion was, and still is, accepted by many persons as indubitable truth. But the simple fact is that human beings have more than five senses, and I am not talking about esoteric senses whose very existence is highly debatable, such as precognition, clairvoyance, or telekinesis. I mean perfectly ordinary, common, garden-variety senses: of temperature, of balance, of pain, etc.

Our senses serve up to us a rich variety of information about the world external to our skins and internal to our skins. But our curiosity runs beyond our ability to probe the universe with the sensory tools we are born with. We extend, and indeed supplement, our human senses with artfully crafted scientific instruments. Our scientific instruments extend the range of our senses, to the infrared, to the ultraviolet, and beyond; to the subaudible, to the cryogenic, to the microscopic, etc. Our instruments, too, can make discriminations much finer than we ourselves are personally capable of: the nanosecond, the micron, the milligram, etc. And our instruments can even reveal features of Nature to which our senses seem to be blind, such as the polarization of the sky, the magnetic field of the Earth, or the direction of an electrical current. Such knowledge, as provided by our senses and by the extension of those senses through the use of scientific instruments, is considered to be *experiential* knowledge.

Only a little of experiential knowledge is passive. The greatest part is the result of our (individually and collectively) actively examining and manipulating the environment with an eye to gaining knowledge. Our creative talents are pressed to the limits in this enterprise and reach their greatest fruition in our creating science. Few of the workings of Nature are written on the surface, as it were. To understand how the world operates we need to guess about its workings, to test those guesses, and then to guess again and again when those guesses turn out to be incorrect. Popper has called the method of science “conjectures and refutations”. Just as aptly it could be called “a creative guessing game”.

The growth in experiential knowledge has been prodigious in extent and remarkable in its variety. Science has revealed to us many of the nearly infinitesimal components of the atom and much of the structures of galactic clusters; many of the secrets of inorganic matter and those of living tissues; a considerable number of the operations of the insensate, and some of the infinitely more subtle operations of the consciousnesses of human beings.

What is there about hydrogen and oxygen that allows them to form a molecule? What is there about these same elements which prevents

each of them from forming molecules with seven of their own kind, i.e. why are there no molecules consisting solely of eight atoms of hydrogen, and none consisting solely of eight atoms of oxygen? What is the normal evolution of stars? How are genes replicated? How do muscles contract? These are the sorts of questions which science can answer.

Nonetheless, experiential knowledge, whether the product of passive, unaided human sensory perception or the result of the most highly imaginative and sophisticated scientific hypothesizing combined with controlled experimenting with technically refined instruments, still can take us only so far. Our desire for explanations forever transcends what experience, even when pushed to its limits in science, can possibly offer us. Experience cannot answer a question such as “What must a world be like in order that there should be able to exist within it such things as physical molecules?” Experience cannot tell us, for example, whether a human being, in the final stages of Alzheimer’s disease, who has lost all ability to recognize and interact with other human beings, is still a person. Experience cannot tell us, for example, whether a (future) computer which perfectly imitates the behavior of a human being is conscious. Experience cannot tell us, for example, whether human beings have free will. And experience cannot tell us whether human beings have immortal, immaterial souls.

These questions, which go beyond the ability of experience, beyond the ability of science, to answer, are metaphysical questions. This, at the very least, is the one common thread in all metaphysical questions. Etymology is not always a good indicator of meaning, but in this instance “meta”, meaning “beyond”, is apt.¹¹ Metaphysical questions are questions whose answers lie “beyond” physics, i.e. beyond science, beyond experience.

11. We want to be careful, however, not to carry the etymology back *too* far. For although the etymology does provide a useful insight, it turns out to be more fortuitous than it might at first appear. There were neither quotation marks nor italics in ancient Greek. Andronicus of Rhodes (c. 70 BC) introduced the term “metaphysics” in editing Aristotle’s writings. At its first appearance, “metaphysics” meant, not “beyond physics”, but “after *Physics*”; that is, Andronicus used the expression to refer to Aristotle’s sequel to the treatise *Physics*. It was only subsequently that the term “metaphysics” came to be understood, not as indicating the position of certain of Aristotle’s writings within his corpus, but rather as the kind of material treated in those writings. (See [54], 1.)

It does not follow, of course, that the converse is true, that every question which lies beyond the abilities of experience to answer is to be regarded as a metaphysical one. Quite the contrary, many such questions are traditionally thought not to be metaphysical ones at all. Questions of ethics and of aesthetics, for example, if their answers really do lie outside of experience, are not usually thought of as being part of metaphysics.

So what we find is that the best we can do is to characterize metaphysical problems as being *among* those problems whose answers take us beyond experience. But what makes one problem in this latter class a metaphysical problem and another a non-metaphysical problem is probably something that, ultimately, can be decided only by examining the history of philosophy to find the verdict of tradition.

Metaphysics can be pursued on a grand scale or it can be narrowly focused on one or a few specific problems. When Bruce Wilshire, for example, begins his book on metaphysics by writing "Metaphysics seeks a comprehensive view of the world" ([215], 13), he clearly is talking of metaphysics conceived in the former manner. And what he tries to do is to explore the rise and fall of a number of historical attempts at creating large-scale metaphysical theories. Metaphysics need not be pursued in that fashion, however. One need not try to solve every metaphysical problem simultaneously by the proposing of a comprehensive theory. One can choose to work piecemeal, by solving, or at least elucidating, specific metaphysical problems. Thus, for example, in this century we have seen a number of books, by a great variety of philosophers, devoted to single problems within metaphysics, e.g. on the nature of mind, on the analysis of causality, on the analysis of free will, on the relations between particulars and universals, and on the nature of space and time. Philosophers who choose to pursue metaphysics in this latter fashion may have no overarching scheme which informs their researches. A philosopher choosing to analyze, for example, the possibility of the existence of free will may, but certainly need not, have a philosophical theory about the nature of space and time.

This book is of the latter design. I examine in subsequent pages only a select number of metaphysical problems. My criterion for choosing is very straightforward: these are the problems which have interested me most in recent years. Utterly no value judgment is intended about the relative merits of the greater part of metaphysics which is not pursued in this book. I am temperamentally disinclined to the kind of grand system building which has attracted some philoso-

phers. I am also somewhat pessimistic about the prospects for success if one endeavors to create a comprehensive system. The probability of error increases with the magnitude of the task. Grand system building is vastly more risky than focusing on specific problems. Indeed, the latter is quite difficult enough for me.

In contrast to Wilshire's opening sentence, which foreshadows an examination of large-scale metaphysical schemes, the opening sentence of P.F. Strawson's book lays the groundwork for his pursuing metaphysics in a more modest fashion: "Metaphysics has been often revisionary, and less often descriptive" ([200], 9). Strawson explains the difference this way:

Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure. ... Perhaps no actual metaphysician has ever been, both in intention and effect, wholly the one thing or the other. ... This book is, in part, and in a modest way, an essay in descriptive metaphysics. Only in a modest way – for though some of the themes discussed are sufficiently general, the discussion is undertaken from a certain limited viewpoint and is by no means comprehensive. ([200], 9, 11)

It should be clear, from what I have already said, that this book, like Strawson's, is one intended by its author to be "undertaken from a certain limited viewpoint and is by no means comprehensive." My aim is to try to lay bare the 'inner logic' (if I may be permitted such a phrase) of some of our most fundamental concepts. But – as Strawson explains – descriptive metaphysics is virtually always accompanied by revisionary metaphysics. And thus I usually will not be content simply to say, "This is the way such-and-such a concept is standardly used." Frequently, I will venture to say something bolder, to wit, something tantamount to "This is the way such-and-such a concept *ought* to be understood." When I do that, I will not merely be reporting how the concept is used; I will be suggesting how we might profitably revise or refine our concept for further use.