

Metaphysics, Epistemology, & Ontology

Lesson 2

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As I have noted in our first lesson, *metaphysics* can be defined as the study of reality. It is a branch of philosophy that deals with questions such:

- a.) What is there?
- b.) What is its nature?

I feel that in order for anyone to get a good grasp of what this branch of science actually encompasses, one must make a lists of what they feel “exists” and “doesn’t exist”. I recommend making a list of what you honestly feel at this point exist and what you feel does not exist. For instance, if you believe in “ghosts,” then add ghosts to your list. If you believe in “God, or a God,” then add it to your list. These things which are being added to your list can either be something material, something non-material, or even a hypothesis (something you believe to be real but has not yet been proven.)

Now once you have postulated the existence of something, or in other words feel that “it” does really exist, then you have a further question to ask yourself; “What is it like, or what is its nature?” These questions, however, are mainly questions for science to answer. Once we get into the causation of a thing is when we start to delve more into the area of what metaphysics or what a metaphysician would study or attempt to answer. We can even take that a step further and ask ourselves does causation exist, what is the relationship between cause and effect? This is where the realm of philosophy and metaphysics comes into play. One could ask can there be a cause after the effect... Can causation go backwards? Is causation relationship between events, object, or facts? These are all great examples of metaphysical questions.

Epistemology, on the other hand, is the study of knowledge. There is a huge difference between what is the case and what we can prove is the case or reality of the case. Now if you know something than it must be the case, right? So the study of what you think is the case and what you know to be the case are two completely different things. This is where the subject of both metaphysics and epistemology comes into play. So epistemology then is the study of knowledge. It studies and deals with questions like:

- a.) What is knowledge?
- b.) Do we have knowledge?
- c.) What can we know?
- d.) And how can we know it?
- e.) Do we have knowledge of the things we think we have knowledge of?
- f.) Are there different types of knowledge?

Lets us examine question A for a second; what is knowledge? Knowledge is justified true belief. If you are going to have knowledge you must have a belief, that belief must be justified, and that belief must be true. Now this is where a person can get confused. A belief is not necessarily knowledge. Someone can have a belief of a certain something, but unless that belief is correctly justified it is merely a belief and not knowledge. So someone can believe that they know something, but since it is still not justified it is still just a belief. Now there is quite a bit of importance placed on the “justification” of that belief which does influence whether it is actual knowledge or a justified belief. As an example, let’s say that each of you has seen me driving around town in a red BMW. Each of you has seen me in this car several times, and you’ve seen it parked at my place of work. Does the fact that you’ve seen me in this car mean that you have knowledge that I own a red BMW...even though you have justified it by seeing me in it several times? No, it does not. Let’s even further this example by saying that I do in fact own a BMW which is at my house parked in the garage, but it is a black colored BMW. So the conditions that make true the belief have to be the same as the conditions which justify your belief. That is a very important distinction.

The question that I feel is important to ask here, must knowledge be certain? As an example, we “know” that the sun will rise in the morning and will fall in the evening. But are we “certain” of this fact? In this example, perhaps, it is a mere case of that we know something but are not certain of how we know. Another example is that we know that all ravens are black. How do you know that all ravens are black? How can one prove that all ravens are black, even the ones that they have not seen or that no one has ever seen? One might say then that it comes down to justification and or belief.

Ontology is the study of what there is or of what exists:

- a.) Does God exist?
- b.) Do moral values exist?
- c.) Do possibilities exist?
- d.) Do physical objects exist?

As pertaining to the question does God exist? Well, Richard Dawkins, claims that this is a scientific hypothesis, and if that is true than it must be provable by scientific means. So is God a theoretical entity, meaning he is postulated to explain the existence of the entire universe, or is Dawkins right and this question would fall under a direct scientific hypothesis? This is the simplest argument, and it is the argument that people have been debating since the beginning of time. Another example would be do you need God to explain right or wrong, or can physics explain it beyond reason and speculation? I believe that if we cannot explain something such as what is right and what is wrong, then in order to form a belief or even an answer then we must reduce it to a factor that can be reasoned or determined. Perhaps one could reduce what is right and wrong to happiness. What of those makes me the most happy? Even God can be, and was attempted to be reduced by Dawkins, by reducing God to a certain security or knowingness that we as humans must have in order to feel some sense of security or place in this world. Kant, who was not a reductionist, on the other hand disagrees. He felt that right and wrong does exist, that moral law does exist in and of itself, and that it is quiet different from anything else.

Another area or topic for discussion within this subject is mental states? Do mental states exist? Well...in order to effectively answer this we must first define what are mental states? Mental states are divided into two categories:

- a.) Propositional attitudes, which are attitudes towards propositions. An example of this would be beliefs, where as you cannot have a belief unless it is a belief about something. Also one can have a desire towards the same content, which is a different propositional attitude. Also intent is another example of a propositional attitude. So towards any content one could believe, desire, or intend.
- b.) Qualitative states, where one has an experience towards certain content. They are states that have a quality to them.

The second set of questions which we must now ask ourselves are, if these things exists what are they like?

- a.) Is God omnipotent, omniscient and good?
- b.) Are moral values absolute or relative? Do we have our own moral law, or does there exist a universal moral law for all of us?
- c.) Are there different possible worlds or are there any different possible states of this world?
- d.) Are the physical objects independent of us, or are they bundles of our ideas?

The only things in this world that we can be sure of are our own experiences. Many feel that our lives, our perception of the world are simply bundles of our own experiences. There is no more to the physical world or physical objects than our experiences and counterfactual experiences to them. As an example, if you try to explain to me that you have any reason to believe that the physical world exists that doesn't appeal to an experience of yours or a counterfactual experience of yours and you will fail. Let's take for instance the fridge that sits in your kitchen. If you were to leave the kitchen and go to bed, and then wake up in the morning and enter the kitchen again, would the fridge still be there? Yes, most of us would have reason to believe that it would still be there. It is from these experiences in which we can form the "belief" that the fridge in your kitchen does exist. But how do we know for sure that the fridge does in fact exist outside of our experience?

Take time and review this material and really think about the questions and examples shown here. We will spend sometime in the next lesson reviewing this material and will delve a bit deeper into these wonderful, vast, and exciting topics of metaphysics...