

PHIL 1480: Metaphysics

Cian Dorr

January 5th, 2006

1. 'Metaphysics'

'The study of ultimate reality'

2. 'What is' questions in other parts of philosophy

Ethics: what is it for something to be good/bad/right/wrong/virtuous/vicious

Epistemology: what is it for someone to know something? what is it for a belief to be reasonable?

Philosophy of Mind: what is it for someone to be conscious? what is it for someone to believe/desire/hope/fear/... that something is the case?

Philosophy of Language: what is it for a word to have a certain meaning? what is it for someone to mean/say something?

3. Some 'what is' questions we'll be looking at in this course, together with other related questions

What is it for something to be past / present / future?

- Are there any things that used to exist but no longer exist, or will exist but don't yet exist?

What is it for someone to be *able* to do something?

- Is it possible for anyone to be able to do something that that do not in fact do?
- Is it consistent to suppose that someone can do something that they won't, in fact, do?

What is it for something to persist through time?

- Could anything continue to exist while changing its parts?
- Could several different material objects be in exactly the same place at a given time?
- To what extent is what is involved in an object's persisting through time similar to what is involved in an object's being extended in space?

What is it to be a ship? (for example)

- Could a *ship* persist through a total change of parts?

What is it to be a person?

- Could a person survive the transplantation of her brain?
- Does it make sense for a person to care a lot about his or her own continued existence?

What is it for it to be the case that if one thing had happened, something else *would* have happened?

- Would earlier times be the same no matter what had happened at later times?
- If so, why?

What is it for something to happen *because* something else happened?

- Why is it that in general, later things happen because of how things were at earlier times, and not the other way round?
- Is it possible that it should sometimes be otherwise?

What is it for a person to travel into the past?

- Is time-travel possible?
- Would a time-traveller be able to kill his own grandfather?

3. What I understand by 'ultimate reality'

'What is' questions can't go on having non-trivial answers forever. If we keep asking and answering such questions, eventually we'll reach rock bottom: a stage at which there's simply nothing more to say.

The question about the nature of ultimate reality is the question what kinds of facts are basic in this sense.

For example: one debate we'll be considering quite closely is the question whether ultimate reality is *tensed*. That is: is there any value of F such that: (i) there is nothing to be said in answer to the question 'what is it for something to be F', and (ii) it is possible that some things that are F will cease to be F in the future, or were non-F in the past; or that some things that are not F will come to be F in the future, or were F in the past.

4. Doubts about whether metaphysics is worthwhile