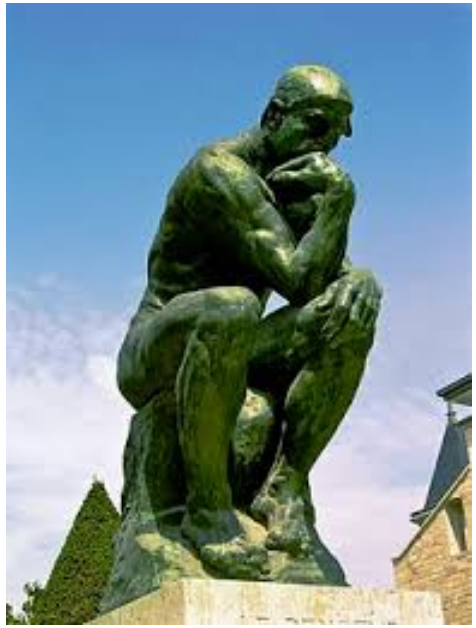
INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

PROFESSOR DUNCAN PRITCHARD

TOPIC 7
METAPHYSICS

- Metaphysics is a core area of philosophy, one that goes right back to the very inception of philosophical theorising.
- The goal of metaphysical inquiry, in its broadest terms, is to understand the nature of reality at its most fundamental level.
- The best way to get a handle on what metaphysics is, however, is to do it!



ABSTRACT OBJECTS

- Abstract objects are objects that are not made of matter, and are thus not located in space-time.
- Consider, for example, numbers. We use numbers every day, but they don't seem to be physical objects, but rather abstract objects.
- Those who think that there are abstract objects are known as *Platonists*, while those who think that there are no abstract objects are known as *nominalists*.

ABSTRACT OBJECTS

- Why might one be a Platonist about abstract objects? One reason is that the natural explanation of why a proposition involving abstract objects—e.g., that 2+2=4—is true is that the abstract objects involved stand in the appropriate relation to each other. (Compare claims involving non-abstract objects, such as that the cat sat on the mat).
- But how can an abstract object really exist? This is why some are attracted instead to nominalism, and hence must come up with an alternative explanation of why claims involving abstract objects are (or at least seem to be) true.

ABSTRACT OBJECTS

- A rationale in favour of nominalism is the empiricist idea that all we ever encounter in experience are material objects.
- It follows that if we know that, for example, 2+2=4, it can't be because we are acquainted with abstract objects. Hence, we need an alternative explanation of how we know this to be true.
- But then, if one is a nominalist, what does make such claims true, if it is not the objects themselves?

ABSTRACT OBJECTS

- One popular kind of nominalism, known as *fictionalism*, argues for the radical conclusion that claims involving abstract objects are *not* true. According to this view, such claims, such as mathematical claims, are like a story or narrative.
- Claims in a story, such as that 'Harry Potter is a wizard', have a kind of truth. Sure, they are not true in the sense that there is such a person, Harry Potter, who is an actual wizard. But they are true within a narrative.
- The idea is that, for example, mathematics is also a domain which exhibits such 'narrative truth'.
- But this really capture how we employ mathematical claims?

Someone who doesn't exist, yesterday

PROPERTIES

- We deal in properties all the time. A chair may have the property of being blue, or being ugly, or being too large to fit through the door. But what is it for something to be a property?
- According to one historically important view of properties, they are abstract objects called *universals*.
- Universals don't exist in space or time—they are abstract objects. But objects have properties in virtue of exhibiting universals. For example, my shoes are brown and the couch is brown in virtue of both instantiating the same universal of brownness.

Handmade English brogues. Splendid.

PROPERTIES

- An alternative view of properties to universals is that of *tropes*.
- According to this proposal, there is nothing—no property—that my brown couch and my brown shoes share. Rather, they each physically instantiate a distinct property.
- This proposal avoids appeal to abstract objects, but at the cost of giving us no obvious way of explaining why the brown couch and the brown shoe seem to be share a common property. After all, strictly speaking, they don't.

Handmade English brogues. Splendid.

TIME

- One of the big challenges faced by metaphysicians is to account for the nature of time.
- Time is characterized by *temporal relations*, which are relations that hold between different times. For example, that today is temporally after yesterday but before tomorrow.
- There are two main metaphysical proposals about temporal relations. According to *B-theorists*, all temporal relations can be characterized in terms of the relations of being earlier-than, later-than and simultaneous-with. The idea is that in this way we can give all events an unchanging, static temporal order (called the *B-series*).

TIME

- Suppose my birthday is after your birthday, then (at a certain point in time) we might say that while your birthday is in the past, mine is in the future. But on this view this is just to say nothing more than that my birthday is later than your birthday, which is an eternal, and tenseless, fact about the world.
- The problem with this proposal, however, is that it doesn't seem to capture the dynamical nature of time, the fact that it is constantly flowing. After all, according to this proposal we can reduce all tensed talk of time to a completely tenseless ordering.

TIME

- We can see this problem more clearly by taking a look at an alternative account of time, and thus temporal relations, known as the *A-series* (as offered by *A-theorists*).
- On this view, which events have the property of being present changes as time flows forward. So what is present now was the future before and will soon be the past. On this view, then, one cannot reduce temporal relations to a tenseless B-series.
- The A-series seems to more closely correspond to how we experience time, but it also raises puzzles. How can the very same event enjoy (at different times) the property of being future, present, and past?

CAUSATION

- Another challenge facing metaphysicians is to account for the nature of *causation*, as when one ball hits another and causes it to move.
- The problem is that we use the notion of causation in lots of different ways. I might say that the one ball caused the other ball to move, or that it was the road design that caused the crash, or that it was losing my temper that caused me to break to glass, and so on. Can a single theory accommodate all these different uses of the notion of causation?

CAUSATION

- According to the *counterfactual theory of causation*, to say that X caused Y is to say that had X not occurred, then Y would not have occurred.
- So suppose that I claim that it was the poor road design that caused the car crash. Then on this view I am claiming that had the road design been better, then the crash would not have occurred.

CAUSATION

- Although the counterfactual theory of causation fares well with lots of cases, it does face some difficulties.
- For example, suppose that the car crash we just considered came about because the driver was a traffic planner and he was so appalled by the quality of road design that it distracted him and made him crash. The relevant counterfactual about the road design would still be true, but it seems more accurate to say that it was the planner's fixation with the road design that in fact caused the crash.

MEREOLOGY

- *Mereology* is the study of parts and wholes. How do the parts of a thing combine to make the whole? There are three main answers to this question.
- According to *mereological nihilism*, there are no composite objects (i.e., objects composed of parts). Rather, there are just lots of very small objects without parts. But how on this view do we explain our ordinary language talk about objects that are clearly composite (like tables and chairs)?

A composite object: the minotaur

MEREOLOGY

- At the other extreme, there is *mereological universalism*. This holds that any arrangement of parts can be combined to create a new whole.
- This faces the opposite problem to mereological nihilism, in that it seems to mean that there are more composite objects than we previously thought.
- For example, on this view there is a perfectly respectable composite object made of my left leg, the vacuum cleaner down the hall, and the rear axle of my car.

A composite object: the minotaur

MEREOLOGY

- There is also an intermediate view, known as *mereological restrictivism*.
- On this proposal whether a combination of parts counts as a genuine composite whole depends on how the objects are arranged, so not just any combination of parts will result in a genuine composite whole.
- This view lines up more neatly with our intuitions about objects. But the problem it faces is how is one to draw a principled line regarding which combination of parts leads to a genuine composite whole. (E.g., should the parts be in contact with one another? But my left leg touching the vacuum doesn't create a new 'leg-vacuum' whole).

A composite object: the minotaur

LAWS OF NATURE

- In gaining a metaphysical understanding of the nature of reality we don't just want to know what is in fact the case, but more importantly what *must* be the case.
- Suppose we observe that water always boils, in certain atmospheric conditions anyway, at a certain temperature. This establishes that there is a *regularity* between water and heat of a certain kind.
- But we also want to know whether this regularity reflects a lawlike connection between water and heat; whether it is a *law of nature*. After all, one can have the former without the latter. For example, suppose it's true that every top sports coach chews gum. But surely there is no law of nature that determines this.

MODALITY

- In shifting our gaze from what is the case towards what must be the case, or what can't be the case, or what is merely possible, we are turning our attentions to *modality*.
- If something is true not merely because it is a regularity but because it is a law of nature, then we are making a modal claim, in that we are now saying that there is a sense in which it *must* be true (i.e., there is a sense in which it is not possible for it to be false).
- We can distinguish between different kinds of necessity and possibility. If something is *logically possible*, then that means that its happening would not break any logical laws (i.e., the laws that determine what is logically necessary). A 100 foot ant is not a likely thing, but it is logically possible in this sense.

MODALITY

- In contrast, *nomic possibility* is concerned with whether something is possible consistent with the laws of nature (which in turn determine what is nomically necessary).
- Note that something can be logically possible without thereby being nomically possible. It's logically possible that there could be a human being the size of the solar of the system, since this doesn't conflict with any logical laws. But it is unlikely that this would be consistent with the laws of nature, and if so it wouldn't be nomically possible.
- In general, what's nomically possible is logically possible, but the converse doesn't hold.

METAPHYSICS AND SCIENCE

- How does metaphysics relate to science? Often they seem to be concerned with very similar subject matter. Moreover, historically metaphysics and science went hand-in-hand (to the extent that it is only relatively recently in the history of ideas that metaphysical inquiries and scientific inquiries have been conducted separately).
- One key difference between the two inquiries is that science is primarily only concerned with what works. So, for example, mathematics is an effective tool for theoretical science, and hence scientists don't ask (shouldn't ask?) what the metaphysical status of mathematics is (e.g., whether it trades in abstract objects).

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

- One way that metaphysics comes apart from science is in its employment of the methodology of *conceptual analysis*. This involves investigating the nature of our concepts in order to see what they entail, and how they relate to each other.
- For example, what is involved in our concept of free will? This is a philosophical question that doesn't have a straightforward answer, and it is through conceptual analysis that we are able to articulate the different ways that this concept might be understood, and to pick out which of these renderings is plausible.
- Moreover, once we have identified these conceptions of free will, we can then meaningfully ask what the modal status of free will is. For example, is it possible? Or is it impossible? Could it even be necessary? (And remembers that we also need to work out what kind of possibility/necessity is in play: e.g., nomic or logical, etc).

INDISPENSABILITY ARGUMENTS

- Another methodological tool employed by metaphysicians are *indispensability arguments*. The general idea is that if we can demonstrate that science demands there to be objects of a certain kind—i.e., that they are indispensible to science—then that is in itself a reason to think that these objects exist, even if we might find the target objects otherwise philosophically problematic.
- So, for example, one defence of a Platonic conception of mathematical objects (i.e., as genuinely existing abstract objects) is that science cannot be conducted without mathematics. If that's right, and if the only way to make sense of this use of mathematics is to suppose that there are abstract objects, then it follows that we have a rationale for thinking that there are (mathematical) abstract objects.

INDISPENSABILITY ARGUMENTS

- How plausible are indispensability arguments? One problem they face is that they merely seem to show what we are committed to, and not necessarily what is true. For example, even if it's right that science essentially employs mathematics and that mathematical objects are abstract objects, that only shows that we must act *as if* there are abstract objects. Even so, maybe there are no abstract objects (perhaps, for example, it is just a human limitation of scientific inquiry that it resorts to mathematics).
- Moreover, one can always try to undermine indispensability arguments by attacking their premises. Even if it is true, for example, that science essentially involves mathematics, should we accept that the only way to make sense of this usage is in terms of a commitment to abstract objects? Couldn't one offer a fictionalist account of the scientific usage of mathematics that avoids this commitment?

A PRIORI VERSUS A POSTERIORI

- A key difference between philosophy and science is that the latter essentially involves empirical inquiry—that is investigation of the world through observation. Knowledge that results from such empirical inquiries is *a posteriori knowledge*. For example, that Saturn has more than 50 moons.
- In contrast, there also seems to be another route to knowledge that is characteristic of philosophy (though it is also involved in science too, albeit to a lesser extent). This involves finding something out by reasoning and reflection alone. This is known as *a priori knowledge*, or 'armchair' knowledge (since it is knowledge that one can gain from one's armchair). For example, that 2+2=4.

A PRIORI VERSUS A POSTERIORI

- Metaphysical arguments often involve a mixture of a priori and a posteriori premises.
- For example, in an indispensability argument for mathematical Platonism, one finds the a posteriori claim that science makes essential use of mathematics (something that can only be known through empirical inquiry).
- But one also then reasons a priori to the conclusion that abstract objects must exist.

EVALUATING DIFFERENT METAPHYSICAL THEORIES

- Competing metaphysical theories are often *empirically equivalent*, in the sense that both theories are equally compatible with the empirical data. For example, the view that properties are universals and the view that they are tropes are equally compatible with the empirical data.
- In contrast, although it sometimes happens that competing scientific theories are empirically equivalent, they usually aren't. This is good, as it enables scientists to, in principle at least, empirically determine which of the theories is the correct one. In contrast, we can rarely empirically determine which metaphysical theory is true.
- Accordingly, metaphysicians appeal to other factors to adjudicate between different metaphysical theories, such as which theory is *simpler*, which is more *elegant*, which is more *parsimonious* (i.e., which is committed to the least number of entities), which has the most *explanatory power*, and so on. These qualities are known as the *theoretical virtues*.

EVALUATING DIFFERENT METAPHYSICAL THEORIES

- Many of these theoretical virtues are controversial, however. For example, why should a simpler theory be preferred over a more complex one? Perhaps the relevant facts demand a complex theory? Relatedly, who is to decide what is simpler (or, for that matter, what is more elegant)? These look like very subjective ways of assessing metaphysical theories.
- There is also the problem of how we 'trade-off' between different theoretical virtues. Fictionalism in the philosophy of mathematics is a parsimonious theory in that it isn't committed to there being (mathematical) abstract objects. But by denying these objects, it is also committed to a more complex metaphysical theory than its rival, mathematical Platonism, which endorses (mathematical) abstract objects.

FUNDAMENTALITY

- One question that metaphysicians ask is whether some kinds of things are more *fundamental* than others.
- The rough idea is that A is more fundamental than B if B depends on A but not vice versa. Moreover, if there are some kinds of things which don't depend on anything else, but which other things are dependent upon, then they would be candidates for being the most fundamental kind of thing there is.
- But what does it mean to say that something 'depends upon' something else? Metaphysicians often talk here of 'grounding', in that B depends on A if B is grounded in A (and not vice versa).

SUPERVENIENCE

- Another way of articulating how objects in two different domains relate to one another is in terms of *supervenience*.
- So, for example, if one holds that the mental realm supervenes on the physical realm, then one holds that there cannot be a change in the mental realm if there is no change in the physical realm.
- Metaphysically interesting supervenience claims are usually understood *asymmetrically*. This means that while A supervenes on B, B does not supervene on A. This is exactly how the supervenience of the mental on the physical is usually understood, for example.
- This is one way of saying that the mental realm is rooted in the physical realm (such that one can embrace physicalism) without thereby treating the mental realm as completely reducible to the physical realm. (We thus get the *non-reductionist physicalism* that we looked in a previous segment of the course).

MONISM AND PLURALISM

- At the most fundamental level, is the world just one big thing, or a plurality of things? This is the debate between *monism* and *pluralism*.
- In terms of fundamentality, monism is the idea that the world as a whole is more fundamental than its parts, whereas pluralism is the opposing idea that the parts are more fundamental than the world as a whole.
- Notice that the monist and the pluralist each believes in the same objects and properties. They just disagree about what grounds what.
- Notice also that both views are puzzling. How can the world as a whole be grounded in its parts? And if the world as a whole is more fundamental than its parts, then it must be itself ungrounded, since there is nothing else for it to be grounded in. But how can something be ungrounded (moreover, how can something ungrounded be the ground for anything else)?