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Metaphysics

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Metaphysics is well known as one of the deepest and most abstruse departments of philosophy, and philosophy is bad enough in itself. The word itself, however, simply comes from a mistake. Aristotle's treatise on being survived without a title, so they simply called it "the work after the *Physics*," "Meta-physics" in Greek. But this at least allows us to define metaphysics as whatever Aristotle was doing in that work, composed of twelve or thirteen "books," a work which has in fact been extremely influential, and which seems to focus on wisdom, which he defines as "knowledge of explanations and beginnings,"[1] as well as on being.

Aristotle's very first sentence in this work is "All people have a natural urge to know."[2] Twice within the next four or five pages he says "It was through wonder that people began to do philosophy"[3] (a name which means simply "the love of wisdom," and which he took to include what we now call science, along with philosophy). He adds that people wondered about obvious puzzles, and then about more serious things like the changes of the moon and of the sun, about the stars, and the origin of the universe. His second list is similar. People wanted to escape ignorance, and so they wondered about puppets, or the solstices, or the fact that the diagonal of a square cannot be measured exactly against its side.

So philosophy arose by asking questions, and we can write down Inquiry (which is equivalent to wonder), as important.

Inquiry

It is the beginning of scientific and philosophical knowledge. And all such knowledge is summed up in metaphysics, which is taken nowadays to mean roughly the most basic structure of the world, the skeleton of reality.[4] To reach it we must ask questions. I hope to lead up to it in the way that Lonergan does.

Aristotle in one of his early works gives us ten question-words, like "Who," "What," "Which," "When," and so on.[5] Many metaphysicians have taken these over, as ten basic categories, and have said 'If we can

get down to the essence of "What" and "How much" and "What sort" and "What relations," etcetera, then we will have found the basic structure of the world'. Now, this wasn't a bad effort, but it is hardly following Aristotle, because he does not repeat this list in his metaphysics or other later works. That early work, called *Categories*, seems to me to be more on grammar than on metaphysics.

But in another early work, the *Posterior Analytics*, at the beginning of the second book, he says that human beings can ask four sorts of questions.[6] That is fascinating. Inquiry is surely as open as anything. People who have had anything to do with children seem to get that idea, and feel that people have a natural ability to ask questions, and can keep on asking questions. But still Aristotle says there are only four sorts of question. And within a couple of paragraphs he says that these can be reduced to two![7] I am going to accept these two and expand them into another list of four.

The interesting suggestion, from our point of view as philosophers, is that, while the power of inquiry is extremely wide, we can sort out the types of inquiry into a very limited number. And this sorting gives us an overall structure of our knowledge, and of all that we know.

This structure can be arrived at by grouping question-words together, but another way is by looking at what inquiry is directed at, namely the sorts of answers that might be expected by the questions. We can try to classify answers. This can come out very quickly. I would like to do it by exercises, which gives you a great deal more confidence in the results, but, for present purposes, I will just run through those results rather quickly. Some questions lead to a short answer: Is it so?[8] The short answer is simply Yes.

Inquiry Is that so? Yes

Was I in Melbourne yesterday? Yes. That gives you a certain amount of information.

Some questions lead to a long answer:

What[9] is a motor car? A vehicle used for transport normally of persons that is driven by a wheel rolling on the ground using friction and powered by an engine driven by internal combustion.

And you could give a much longer explanation! Briefly, there are explanations. And these are very different from the "Yes." So we can say:

Was I? Yes

What? Explanation

The other two sorts of question are rather different. We can say Where? Where is Sydney? Somewhere over there. Where is Brisbane? Probably somewhere like that. Where is the dining room? Over here. In other words, the answer is not a Yes, or an explanation but simply pointing. You are being directed to attend to a certain area or field of data. Of course, I did say Brisbane, and Sydney. So we can use names instead of pointing. So we can add Names to our list.

Was I?	Yes
What?	Explanation
Where?	Names, or pointing.
	(These select[10] data.)

The fourth type of question is of the form "So what?" or "Will I?" It does not lead directly to knowledge or to the structure of the world. Instead, it may lead to decision and action.[11] These change the world,[12] but leave unchanged the way the world is structured and known.

I have been looking at this more or less grammatically, I suppose. But I think that this approach does give quite a tight sort of distinction between these three levels. We can make the distinction tighter and more precise by looking at the activities concerned in each case. "Yes" is an act of judging, or assenting. Explanation is understanding. And data corresponds to experiencing.

Inquiry	Answer	Activity
Is that so?	Yes	Judging, or Assent
What is that?	Explanation	Understanding
Where?	Names, or pointing	Experiencing

And that, according to Lonergan, is the structure of knowing. He deals with it in 740 pages, but I think we can put it down a bit more briefly, and sometimes he himself does in fact give it quite briefly.[13]

Our claim is that there are very clear distinctions between those three levels. Each upper level presupposes the lower level but adds to it.[14] Judging presupposes understanding, but adds to it. We have to ask just what it does add. What do we get through this structure of knowing?

But first I should say one other thing. I still have a few minutes. Metaphysics is also connected with being. And being is one of the most abstract words you can get, and a hopeless technical philosophical word, as everyone thinks. But they are wrong about this! And this is my own contribution. That we can give a nominal definition of being.[15] Despite the strangeness of the English languages (and of most other languages) in having a variety of words for it, people do rightly pay little attention this variety of words.

I am going to say that being is *not*, in fact, abstract. It is extremely concrete. Being is everything there is. Everything there is, was or will be. Everything about everything,[16] if you like to put it that way.

But I still haven't given the nominal definition that I promised you: Being is what we are referring to when we say Is, Are, Am, Was, Were, or Be.

Those words are obviously connected very closely to each other, differing by nuances, regarding who happens to be speaking, or the number subjects that are being spoken about. If you start using "Being" for something that is not meant by those words, then you are misusing the word. And in fact a number of philosophers have done this. We should ask them, "But is it 'being' that you are talking about?" If their answer does not fit in with our usage of these words, we should ask them to use or invent some other word. And sometimes they half recognize this. Hegel, for instance, preferred to talk about The Absolute. I think he was perceptive to use this other word.

What I wish to stress, of course, is that all ordinary people use these words very often, and accurately, and their hearers have no difficulty in understanding them. If you say, "There is a cow in the garden," they might possibly ask, "What do mean by 'cow'?" or "What garden is it?" but they don't ask "What did you mean by 'Is'?" They understand it.

We communicate very, very successfully through use of these words, Is, Are, Am, Was, Were, and so we are highly conscious of the meaning of

Being, but we haven't bothered to formulate this meaning. And what I have been doing here is to try to formulate this meaning of being.

When you ask, "Is there a cow in the garden?" you use "Is" for connection between that type of animal and a particular place. But you also use it for getting at a fact. "Yes, there is." "No, there is not." "Yes, there is!" An assent has been made. And this assent is a claim to know existence, or reality, or fact, or truth.

Drive	Activity	Component of being
Inquiry	Assent	Existence

Similarly, understanding gives you intelligibility or meaning, or, if you like, positive possibility. There could well be a cow in the garden, and so we have greatly delimited the topic of our conversation.

Understanding Intelligibility

And experiencing - the activity on the lowest level of our structure - is giving you what is presupposed by that possibility or intelligibility, namely potentiality.

Experience Potentiality

Thus:

Assent	Existence
Understanding	Intelligibility
Experience	Potentiality

That right hand column now is the structure of the world.[17] We can put all those together, which gives us being, so I can add this even further to the right.

	(	Assent	Existence	)	
Inquiry	(	Understanding	Intelligibility	)	Being
	(	Experience	Potentiality	)	

The word "Is" is what we have been using here.

Experience leads up to some understanding of what might *be* the case. And intelligibility invites us to consider whether we can rightly assent to what "is" the case. So being incorporates intelligibility and existence. So

we can now give a new definition of being: the goal of inquiry. This is Lonergan's main definition of being,[18] which corresponds beautifully to the nominal definition, as well as to the more common sense definition that I gave earlier, namely "Everything."

The goal of inquiry is the real world. It is the actual world. And Potentiality, Intelligibility, and Existence, are the components of being. Metaphysics is looking at being and its components. The distinctions between these components are precise, tough, distinctions. Potentiality and intelligibility together give essence.[19] So we have a basis for the traditional distinction between essence and existence.

Drive	Activity	Component of Being			
	(Assent	Existence	)	Existence)	
Inquiry	(Understanding	Intelligibility	)	Essence)	Being
	(Experience	Potentiality	)		

Intelligibility is what Plato and Aristotle are translated as calling "Form," but that word today does not convey their meaning so we may as well use a word that does. Intelligibility is what is in the thing enabling it to be understood. And our task, as metaphysicians, is to help people to orient their inquiries so as to arrive at the reality of beings.

They do this by attending to the data, by asking "Do I understand, or don't I?" "What intelligibility have I arrived at?" And by then asking "Is that intelligibility verified?"

Those are the only questions you have to ask, in order to arrive at any sort of knowledge!

They can be subdivided. Lonergan says that metaphysics can grow and develop, so that it can become much more sophisticated, as it does when Lonergan deals with development, for instance, in great detail. But, from our point of view, as beginners, we can say that this diagram covers all that there is in the world. Ask what is the intelligibility of what you experience, and ask whether you can verify this intelligibility in the available data. So we arrive at a very clean concept of the whole world.

Now, how do you find the intelligibility? Through the specific disciplines, as Lonergan insists, including all the sciences, and common sense, and the human sciences, as well as literature and the arts. For

instance, if you are concerned with quantity, you don't look for some abstruse "metaphysical" reality called "quantity", but you ask what sort of data is the mathematician dealing with, what is the intelligibility that the mathematician finds, and whether this intelligibility is ever verified in our common sense practical life, or in the observations and measurements of physicists and the like.

I think that that is all I need to say. That is metaphysics. That is the skeleton of all there is in this world. It unifies and organizes all we know through descriptive and explanatory science, and all that is known or constituted through the practical familiar knowledge of common sense.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.1 (981 b29, 982 a5-6).
2. *Ibid.*, 1.1 (980 a22).
3. *Ibid.*, 1.2 (982 b12-17, 983 a12-16).
4. B.J.F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991 (Collected Works of Lonergan Vol.3) 5/First edition xi, 415/390.
5. Aristotle, *Categories*, 4 (1 b26-28).
6. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 2.1 (89 b23-35).
7. *Ibid.*, 2.2 (90 a6-8).
8. J.H. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, London: Longmans, 1870, Ch.I, 1.1.(1), Gottlob Frege, *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik: Begriffsschriftlich abgeleitet*, Jena: 1893, sections 2 and 5, Lonergan, *Insight*, CWL 3:297/271.
9. Frege, *Op.cit.*, 1, Lonergan, *Insight*, 297/272.
10. Lonergan, *Insight*, 406/382.
11. *Ibid.*, 642/619.
12. Michael Minton has clarified this in his doctoral thesis "The Fourth Level of human Consciousness as taught by Bernard Lonergan S.J. in *Insight*" (Melbourne College of Divinity 2001), which I have been fortunate to discuss at length with him.
13. Lonergan, *Insight*, 299/274 (inverted).
14. *Ibid.*
15. Lonergan, *Insight*, 377/353 makes use of this.
16. Lonergan, *Insight*, 375/351.
17. Lonergan, *Insight*, 457/432, 462/437.
18. Lonergan, *Insight*, 372/348.
19. Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, CWL 2:187 (1967: 177), *Understanding and Being*, CWL 5:166 (1980:205).
20. Lonergan, *Insight*, 5/xi, 425/400.