

Getting rid of Metaphysics

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When Immanuel Kant was awakened from what he termed his «dogmatic slumbers» by reading David Hume, he decided that there could be no justification for the metaphysical speculations of his day, and set out to discredit them. History has judged him correct – i.e., on the thought of his day, which was much given to speculation beyond experience, founded on nothing more than the common assumptions of society. Naturally, modern thought since Kant has attempted to defend itself from any accusation of «metaphysics». Since that thought has been deeply invested in the results of modern science, however, it did so by assuming that Kant's project had been carried through by science. This conclusion followed from translating «metaphysics» as «beyond the physical», and substituting «physical reality» for «experience». The last substitution was made in order to advance a notion of reality that could not be identified with experience, but that very restriction has turned out to be problematic.

I The Two Meanings of «Metaphysics»

Aristotle did not use the term, but certain books of his became known as the treatises *ta meta ta phusika* – what comes after or beyond the physical (*phusika* derives from *phusis*: «Nature» – both in the sense of «the world of nature» and «what something is by nature» – its kind, sort, or species. And since the root *phu* carries the meaning «to grow», and the ending indicates activity, we can gloss the term as «that which comes to be», «comes to itself», or, in Heidegger's interesting gloss, «that which comes to appearance»). Thus the title, given to treatises on what Aristotle himself calls «first philosophy», could mean anything from the rather mundane «the books after the Physics», since this section followed the Physics, to the rather profound «study of those principles that make natural things possible», which in modern terms would examine those relations necessary to thinkable – i.e., intelligible – phenomena.

The second of these is promising, since that meaning would also qualify Pre-Socratic philosophy, to which much of the Aristotelian text is addressed. Discarding

the «books after the Physics», we have are left with two important modern meanings for «metaphysical»: (1) an echo of a possible original meaning of relations that make the world intelligible, and (2) the modern sense of speculations beyond the reach of physical evidence. Kant targeted the second of these, at least in intention, and labored to set out the first – the relations by which *experience* is possible. From these studies he hoped to discover the scope of knowledge to be gained from experience and its basis. How well he succeeded in this is another problem, which need not be addressed here.

On the other hand, the distinction between the first and second meanings above does concern us. The question of *how experience is intelligible* (or how cognition is possible, which amounts to the same thing) has already received an answer, implicit or explicit, by the time any other question about the world can be addressed. It lies in a prior position to all others. This reflection may explain why PreSocratic thought seems so much concerned with those principles that are found to be general to all experience, and why Aristotle's treatises on «first philosophy» also generalize on the world of *phusis*. In his own way Kant tried to continue the same project, and such matters are still of pressing concern in European phenomenology, where the study of appearances gives rise to a theory of cognition.

The sciences, on the other hand, have generally not shared this excitement. «Appearances» (phenomena) imply human *experience* rather than *reality*, the way things *seem* to us rather than the way they *are*. The progress of science, in the usual outlook, is very much dependent upon the attempt to remove the differences between observers by deleting all observer contribution from the objects observed. Thus, research into the preconditions of *experience* in general, and a theory of cognition, are recognized as legitimate tasks in psychology, where they tell us about the *observer*, yet are labeled as speculative «metaphysics» when the intention is to learn about the *world*. After all, the conditions that attach to the observer may be general for all observations, but are not necessarily informative about the objects to be observed.

II Two ways of thinking

Notice that the two meanings of metaphysics derive from two directions in thought – actually two ways of thinking – which result in two very different notions how the world is known. Let me illustrate what I mean.

Prior to any other conclusion of the usual «scientific» mode of thought, for example, one has already supposed a total independence between thinking and the objects of thought. The task of thinking is therefore the creation of an inward reflection, in thought, of an independent outer reality. As a plane mirror does not add to the content of the thing imaged, so thinking should simply reproduce rather than add anything of its own to the reality thought about. All authority, of course, rests with the external world, and thus some sort of physical test must support every conclusion about it. In this context, the accusation of metaphysics results from any from any attempt to allow thinking more active role than that of a passive recorder.

By «a more active role» I mean to indicate the notion, central to certain forms of