

## PHILOSOPHY OF BEING

Theme: Is there such a thing as metaphysical knowledge; can any metaphysical knowledge claims be valid?

I. What does the word 'metaphysics' mean in this context?

One meaning is non-empirical knowledge, to be discussed later. The first reading considered the relations between three other descriptions of metaphysical knowledge: knowledge of the answers to ultimate questions, knowledge of what is true of things insofar as they are existents as opposed to being any particular kind of existent, and knowledge of things from the most universal point of view.

The 'Ultimate Questions' readings mentioned specific examples to illustrate these abstract descriptions. The lion's share of human questions concerns causes, explanations. In one way or another all causes bear on existence; they explain directly or indirectly why something exists. So questions about causality as such, as opposed to this or that kind of causality, are questions asked from the perspective of existence, ontological questions. Conversely, questions concerning the causes of things insofar as they are existents, as opposed to this or that kind of existent, are questions about what is ultimate in the order of causality.

Another prominent example of an ultimate question from the reading was the question "Does God exist?" The ultimacy of this question follows from the definition of the word 'God' as the supreme cause of things, the cause who needs nothing else to make Him and hence terminates the search for causes. This example illustrates that ultimate questions are ontological for the following reason. The explanation "because God made it that way" would apply to any existent at all regardless of what kind of existent it was. It would explain the thing as an existent, not as this or that kind of existent.

Obviously the two examples, the question of causality as such and the question of God, are related not only in themselves but also from the point of view of the descriptions of metaphysics the handouts were discussing. If there is a creator, one who makes out of nothing, He is ultimate in the order of causality, because He is a cause of existence as such. And if there

is such a thing as a cause of existence as such it is because that thing is ultimate in the order of causality.

II. Where the first reading merely mentioned examples of metaphysical questions, the second reading worked out in detail a specific example of a metaphysical knowledge claim, the claim that we can know God exists for the reasons given.

This example is obviously important in itself and obviously illustrates the description of metaphysical knowledge already given. But there are two other reasons why it is a particularly good example. First its logical structure is typical of metaphysical reasoning in general. We will see more of this later.

Second this example made explicit the relation between two of the questions mentioned in the first reading to illustrate the concept of metaphysical knowledge: the question of the existence of an efficient cause which is ultimate since it does not have any cause prior to it and the question of (efficient) causality as such, do things need efficient causes or do they not. For this claim to knowledge that there is an uncaused cause depends upon it being necessarily true that things composed of act and potency come into existence only through the action of efficient causes. If the principle of causality is necessarily true, we know there must be a supreme, uncaused cause.

The second reading would have exemplified the point of the first better if it had made explicit that the uncaused cause of change must also be a cause, which produces existence directly, i.e., out of nothing. We will show later that this explicitly ontological conclusion does follow from the argument.

III. The theme of the course is whether metaphysical knowledge claims can be valid. The second reading is presented an example of such a claim, which brings together some important metaphysical themes and illustrates the structure of metaphysical arguments in general.

The third reading directly attacks the premise on which everything in the argument for God depended, the principle of causality. And in so doing it invokes principles that, if true, would count against the validity of metaphysical knowledge claims in general, not just this

particular example. How Hume's reasoning can be extended to metaphysics in general will begin to come clear in the next reading.

And even if it didn't attack the basis of the argument for God's existence, Hume's position would be relevant to metaphysics, as we have defined it. For he raises the question of the nature of causality as such, not this or that kind, and reaches the skeptical conclusion that we can have no knowledge of whether such a thing as causality exists.

Summing up: In pursuit of an answer to whether there is metaphysical knowledge, we have done three things. First we discussed some general descriptions of metaphysical knowledge. Second we analyzed in detail an argument exemplifying those general descriptions. Third we analyzed in detail a counter-argument exemplifying the view that metaphysical arguments cannot produce genuine knowledge.