

Ultimate Questions

1.

The word 'ultimate' means final, last, highest (depending on the point of view), foundational, rock-bottom, basic. Let me give some examples of what it means to ask for an ultimate explanation for something, to raise ultimate questions. If men have freedom of choice the explanation of why they do certain things comes to a stop at "he did it because he freely chose to do it." That is an ultimate explanation. Contrast that to the case in which men do not have free choice. The explanation does not stop there but we must now ask why did he chose to do it. Perhaps because he was determined by his heredity or his environment to have a certain kind of preference; the choice itself is no longer ultimate. If we are asking whether life ends at death we are asking an ultimate question. If we explain why a politician wins an election by saying that he won because he fooled the people, we are giving one kind of explanation. If we explain that he won the election because God willed the election of that politician, we give another kind of explanation¹ an ultimate explanation. It is ultimate because the person who believes in God presumes Him to be a cause of things who does not have any need of being caused by anything else. True or false, the hypothesis is that the Causality stops with Him; the hypothesis is that the causality is ultimate. About the other explanation, on the other hand, we can always ask further questions: how did the fooling of the people come about, what caused it, why did the press let him get away with it, etc. One more example: contrast questions such as "how did the moon get formed" "where do cosmic rays come from" "what were the causes of the Vietnam war" to "why is there anything rather than nothing" "why does anything exist at all?" The last two are ultimate questions.

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“Ultimate” of course is a relative term, different things may be ultimate from different points of view; and the same thing may be ultimate from one point of view and non-ultimate from another. To ask whether the basic assumptions of mathematics are necessarily true or are merely convenient suppositions is to ask an ultimate question about mathematics. But asking that will not give you directly any Information about the final meaning of *human* life, for Instance, whether or not there are any absolute values worth pursuing and holding onto no matter what happens as opposed being completely relative to the circumstances and the subjective preferences of each individual human being. In other words, asking an ultimate question about mathematics will not necessarily tell you whether there is anything worth building your life around in the sense of dedicating yourself to it totally In the confidence that it will not fail you.

Since there are different kinds of ultimate question, there are different branches of philosophy. Another way to put it is that there are different dimensions to human experience but philosophy is always trying, in one way or another, to uncover the most fundamental principles of existence and thought and to clarify the different dimensions of our experience in their light. But can ultimate questions be answered? If we say that they cannot, we contradict ourselves for we have then given an answer to *an* ultimate question. Is it worth asking them? As Socrates said, the unexamined life is not worth living. Our intelligence is what gives us our dignity It is therefore beneath our dignity to lead our life unconscious of what it is all about.

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Although ‘ultimate’ is a relative term and refers to different things from different points of view, is there any point of view that can be called ultimate with respect to all other possible

points of view? Are there any questions that are ultimate in an absolute sense. What if we answer this question in the negative? We are in the same kind of contradiction we saw above; we are assuming some sort of absolute point of view in order to deny the existence of any such point of view. Thus one philosopher has made the statement that there are no ultimate questions only next-to—ultimate questions; but if there is no last, how can there be a next-to—last? In any case the statement that there is no most basic point of view from which to look at things is not just the ordinary kind of statement you will find in a newspaper or a novel. It is a philosophical statement whose implications are as ultimate as you can get. Another philosopher has said “everything is relative, that is the only absolute.” Again, one cannot avoid adopting a point of view more basic than others to make such a statement.

Metaphysics has always been the science that sought answers to ultimate questions, ultimate in the most basic sense of that term. There are other branches of philosophy but their questions deserve to be called philosophical to the extent that they are similar to or are related to the questions of metaphysics. For the other branches of philosophy will ask fundamental questions about some particular zone of our experience while metaphysics asks ultimate questions about our experience as a whole. Another way of

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putting it is that the most basic branch of philosophy must formulate its questions about reality as a whole rather than about any particular aspect of reality. Metaphysics must be a general or universal knowledge to which all other forms of knowledge must be compared as more particular or

more narrow no matter how broad they may appear in themselves.

Let us ask why metaphysics, the branch of philosophy which tries to find the most basic principles of reality and thought, cannot have as its goal the illumination of some particular dimension of our experience among others, why it must be a universal knowledge formulating questions and answers that relate somehow to the whole of our experience. First what does it mean for knowledge to bear on some partial aspect of reality? Consider how many different sciences produce statements that are true of man. The law of falling bodies belongs to physics; that law applies to man as much as it does to any other kind of thing. Innumerable laws of chemistry apply to men as well as to animals, plants and inanimate things. Truths discovered by biology apply to men and to other living things; but the principles of sociology, economics, anthropology, etc. apply only to man. How can it be that all of these kinds of knowledge are distinct yet they all make discoveries true of the same kind of thing namely, human beings?

Obviously each of these branches of knowledge approaches things from a different point of view, and the discoveries any of them makes will apply to anything falling under that point of view, Thus the law of falling bodies applies to men insofar as men are

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subject to motion but not insofar as men display the defining characteristic of organic life; for the law of falling bodies will apply to nonliving things that are subject to motion as much as it will to living things. The principles of biology, on the other hand, apply to things displaying organic life but not to non-living things. The best way to put this is to say that one science studies one class

of things while another science studies a different class, for instance, that physics studies the class of spatially mobile objects while biology studies the class of living objects. This is very true but it is not the best way to put it, i.e., the way that is most illuminating for understanding the differences between sciences and between science and philosophy.

Why do two or more things belong to the same class, why do we group them together for purposes of study? Because they have certain characteristics in common. Two different plants belong to the same class, e.g., the class of living things, because of the features possessed intrinsically by each of the plants, because certain of the characteristics possessed by each are characteristics included in what we refer to as life—functions. Two different men belong to the class of human beings because in each of them is found the defining features of human life. So instead of saying a science, e.g., biology, studies the class of living things, let us say it studies things (anything) insofar as they display the proper attributes of organic life, it views objects under the aspect of life, it studies things insofar as they are living. Thus physics studies things insofar as they

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display the attribute of mobility and its laws apply to men and rocks. Psychology studies things insofar as they display sensory and rational behavior so its laws apply to animals and men but not to rocks. Things, in other words, can possess many different kinds of aspects at the same time because of which they will fall under the study of different branches of knowledge.

Getting back to metaphysics, when we say it approaches our experience taken as a whole and not some partial dimension of it, or when we say that it deals with reality taken as a whole,

we do not mean it simply deals with everything in reality taken as one big class, i.e., one big super-grouping of everything as if into one pile. Rather we mean it deals with the whole of our experience because it deals with the most universal aspect of things. Because all things must possess this aspect they fall into the class of real things, beings, but their falling into this class is only a side—effect as it were of their possessing this characteristic. What in this characteristic?

Assume you are walking on a strange country road on a dark night, you spot a sizable upright object in the distance and can only dimly make out its shape. You don't know what it is. It could be a man, a tree stump, a statue, a tall bush. You don't know these things about it but you are not completely ignorant of it. You do know that it is something occupying a certain amount of space in the distance; and you do know that it is something which exists. Here is that most universal aspect of things we are looking for. This is what we first know about anything we experience, that it exists. And this is the one characteristic we can be immediately certain all objects we could possibly experience will possess, existence.

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Existence is necessarily the most universal feature of things because it is necessarily the most fundamental. It is prior to all other features in reality, therefore it is prior to all others in thought.

The reason our knowledge that the object in the distance exists is more certain than our knowledge of whether it is a man or a stump or a bush is that before anything can be a man it must exist, in order for anything to have the characteristics we associate with a stump it must first of all have existence. In order for an object to be either British or American it must at least be human; in order for an object to be either an elm or an oak it must at least be a tree. Likewise in

order for that object in the distance to be either a man or a stump it must at least be an existent.

Since the most fundamental way of looking at things is to look at them as existing, this is the view point we must take if we are really asking ultimate questions. Any other viewpoint is less than ultimate. Notice however that our example of the object in the distance seemed to leave open the possibility that a feature other than existence was ultimate. For in addition to knowing that the object existed we knew that it took up space, in other words we knew that it was some kind of material thing. Why then is not the characteristic of being material or physical just as ultimate as existence? It is even possible that the two coincide completely that the only existents are material things. Yes but that possibility

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itself shows that existence is really the more ultimate. For while it is possible that the class of existents and the class of material things co-include, that is by no means immediately evident; if it is true we could only know it was true as the result of a protracted investigation. Is consciousness material, for instance; do the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology explain it completely? That is a question worth thinking about. But what is not worth thinking about is whether consciousness exists. What does not need a protracted investigation is that immaterial things would have existence in common with material things even though they did not have other features in common. So existence must be a more fundamental point of view from which to look at things because it would be a direct contradiction to postulate a reality that did not exist whereas it at least would not be a direct contradiction.

So metaphysics is the attempt to gain knowledge about what is true insofar as they are

characterized as having existence rather than having materiality, life, rationality or whatever. As we said above, however, there are philosophical questions to be asked about particular zones of our experience; there are philosophies of nature, vegetative, animal and human life, law, art, morality, mathematics etc. Ultimacy is what makes philosophical questions about these areas philosophical questions as opposed to any of the other kinds of questions that can be raised about these areas of experience. But ultimacy implies a focus on existence as the organizing point of view of our investigation. So what makes philosophy's investigation of these other

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areas philosophical is that philosophy looks at them in the light of principles true of things insofar as they are existents and to illuminate these zones of our experience in the light of these principles. For example, if metaphysics arrives at the conclusion that there can be no being without purpose, i.e., that every being must have some essential goal, then we have the right to ask about man in the light of that principle what is man's essential goal, what is the purpose of human life. If metaphysics tells us that every being must have a cause, then we have the right to ask about man what are the causes of our decisions and if they are caused, can they be free? If metaphysics tells us that existence necessarily implies value then value appears to be something absolute; but if value is not linked essentially to existence, it appears that at most it is something relative, i.e., relative to specific spheres of existence. Many other examples will be forthcoming.

What we have done so far is to illustrate the notion of ultimate questions by means of example and then to establish a connection between asking questions that are ultimate in the purest sense of that term, on the one hand, and trying to find out what is true of things insofar as they are existents, on the other hand. And we have said that metaphysics is the branch of knowl-

edge that tries to discover truths about things by looking at them from the standpoint of their existence. Another name for the outlook of metaphysics is the ontological outlook.

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”Ontos” is the Greek word for Being that which exists; and metaphysics is commonly described as the study of being (things) as being (what exists) in contrast to other kinds of knowledge which study being as physical or living or socio-economic etc. And to ask philosophical questions about specific areas of experience is to look at these from an ontological point of view.

What I wish to do now briefly is to look at a couple of other ways of establishing this connection between ultimacy and the ontological point of view with the hope that the connection will be made clearer. A great part of our search for knowledge of any kind and in any domain consists of asking why, of wanting to know the cause, the reason for something. Lets assume that we are interested in the cause of sunburn and to avoid technicalities, let us say we are asking the cause of our skin becoming red. Now, whenever we ask for the cause of anything we are in one way or another inquiring about existence for we are asking why something exists. In this case, for instance we are asking why redness comes to exist in our skin or why our skin comes to exist in this particular way. But although all causal questions refer in some way or other to existence it is one thing to give an answer to a causal question in terms of a cause of existence absolutely considered and it is another thin to answer a causal question in terms of a cause of only a particular kind or mode of existence considered as that particular kind. Thus if there is a God Who makes the world out of nothing, then it is true to answer

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our question about redness by saying that our skin becomes red because God made the world that way. Even though that answer would be true, however, it would not tell us anything about redness in particular, about redness as one specific mode of being. For the same answer will apply to anything in the world, not just to sunburn. “Because God made the world that way” will explain the periodic table of elements, the number of continents, why water freezes and everything else. The explanation by means of God would be more general and it would be more general because more fundamental. If there is a God, He is not a cause just of this mode of existence or that mode of existence but of existence as such. That is, He doesn’t merely explain why something exists in that way, as red, rather than that way, e.g., as pale, he explains why the thing exists at all whatever specific features its existence may possess.

This illustrates again that the study of the most fundamental questions will be the study of things as beings, as existents, for this is the most fundamental way that the causal question about things can be answered. *And* because this approach is most fundamental, it is most universal. Note that it was relevant to use a theory about God in this example because we were trying to illustrate why ultimate questions are ontological questions. And the question whether things need to be caused to exist by God is as sure an example of an ultimate question as we can get.

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All looking for causes is a search for causes of existence. Therefore causal investigations concerning existence as such — not this or that way of existing are investigations of what is ultimate in the order of causality. Conversely investigations concerning causality as such, e.g., is it necessary that everything have a cause producing it or that everything have a purpose (final cause) for existing, a goal its existence is intended to accomplish, investigations concerning

causality absolutely considered rather than this or that specific instance of causality are investigations of things insofar as they are beings rather than this or that kind of being. Again statements that everyone will admit to be concerned with rock-bottom issues, e.g., whether or not there is a God, whether or not there is final meaning in life, turn out to be ontological questions. So whichever way you approach it you get the same result. If you are dealing with the most fundamental issues our intellect can examine, you will be dealing things as existents and therefore inquiring about things that have significance for our experience taken as a whole. If you are raising the most universal questions our intellect can examine, you will be inquiring about things as existents and therefore about the most fundamental questions. If you are studying things precisely as being, existents, you will be raising the most fundamental and most universal issues concerning the objects of our experience.

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We must note in passing the questions can be ontological to a greater or lesser degree. The concepts we are using to interpret our experience are ontological to the extent that there is an explicit reference to the concept of existence in their definitions, i.e., in the statement of how any one of the concepts differs from other concepts. But such an explicit reference can be more or less direct and the definition may also involve reference to a greater or lesser number of other concepts as well, thereby depending on these concepts in addition to the concept of existence. I will give an example of more or less direct references to the concept of existence later.

There is one more way we can approach the connection between the idea that metaphysics asks the most ultimate questions and the idea that metaphysics asks questions about things insofar as they are beings. The contradictory statements mentioned above: there are no ultimate questions only next-to—ultimate ones and everything is relative—that is the only absolute, are

examples of a special kind of logical contradiction called self-referential inconsistency. They are like the following “every statement within these quotation marks is false,” if it’s true then it’s false and if it’s false then it’s true. Of a more ordinary kind of contradiction such as “the white sheet was black” we can immediately say that it false. Of self—referentially inconsistent statements logicians have traditionally hesitated over whether to call them false or to say they are neither true nor false. But in either case there is something wrong with these formulas.

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either case there is something wrong with these formulas.

Self-referentially inconsistent statements have played an important role in the history of discussions about the nature and limits of metaphysics. They keep popping up and have done so so frequently that it is a safe bet that they always will. They usually take the form of asserting that some form of inquiring other than ontological analysis is the most fundamental kind of knowledge about what exists. For instance, different philosophers have asserted that the method of mathematics or logic could be used to find the answers to all the really important questions; that any questions that could not be handled by such methods were either unimportant or pseudo-questions or beyond the power the human mind to answer. Claims like this are usually made at the birth of the science they are making absolute or after some important new development of that science. In the emotional excitement surrounding the new discovery wildly exaggerated claims are made concerning the extent of it’s significance for human thought. Now, it is believed, we can at last lay to rest all those deep questions that man has pondered since the beginning of thought. Only after the initial burst of enthusiasm is over and all but a few die-hards can place the new discovery in a larger perspective, does sanity return. But by then another new science has

developed or has been rejuvenated by a recent advance and its adherents are making claims for it comparable to the previous claims. It is natural to want to assign a great importance to our

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own work, our own point of view, our own projects and contributions. But human pride leads to excesses in the affairs of the mind just as much as it does in practical affairs and relations between persons.

The trouble with a belief such as the one that the methods of mathematics can be used to resolve all human questions or at least all questions that are both important and answerable is that this belief itself does not result from a mathematical investigation of anything; nothing in mathematical method will necessarily lead to the conclusion that this belief is true. What it results from is someone's enthusiasm about the power of mathematics. In itself it is self-referentially inconsistent. If all truths are mathematical, the statement that all truths are mathematical is not a truth. One of the most common forms this fallacy takes is the following: the only statements we can know to be true are those that we can verify through sense observation the way that the statements of empirical science are verified. If that statement is true, it is obviously not subject to verification by means of sense observation. No amount of sense observation can tell us that there is nothing beyond sense observation.

This particular fallacy, the empirical fallacy takes many different forms. Sometimes one hears psychologists or sociologists making claims to the effect that the only questions worth asking about the limits and value of human knowledge are

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questions in the domain of the psychology or sociology of knowledge. But a claim such as that cannot be arrived at by taking a sociological survey or by observing the behavior of a subject. What these claims really amount to is an expression of the fact that questions in the sociology or psychology of knowledge are the ones that the maker of the claim finds personally interesting. But in making the claim he absolutizes his own limited point of view. Questions about the limit and value of human knowledge, by the way, have traditionally been reckoned in the domain of the science of ultimate questions for an obvious reason; our knowledge of the answers to such questions define the ultimate extent of our knowledge and its final value.

Our fallacy can take even more forms. Psychologists such as Freud have claimed to be able to explain man's religious beliefs as having a subjective origin in the human psyche; they may be, for instance projections of a father—image based on insecurity. But some of those who accept such explanations conclude that man's religious beliefs have thereby been shown false. This would be a legitimate conclusion if there were no other questions to be asked about religion than those asked by the psychologist. But in the case of no idea, religious or not, does an account of its origin give us any information regarding its truth or falsity. If we originally get an idea in a dream, for instance, that idea might turn out to be true; the first person who conceived the idea of the earth going around the sun rather than vice-versa might just as well have been drunk when he got the idea for all the difference it

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makes to the truth or falsity of the idea.

One more example. People have claimed that sociology has demonstrated that there are no moral absolutes. We need not go into the details of the claim here; for it is disputed, even within the field itself whether sociological evidence has uncovered any moral universals in all the

societies it has studied. We need not go into the details of that evidence because even if sociologists were able to uncover no universal moral principles, we would not have begun to settle the problem of moral absolutes. For the question this claim rises is whether sociological knowledge is the relevant kind of knowledge called for here. No doubt if sociological knowledge is the only kind possible in the area, it is therefore the only kind that is relevant. But is sociological knowledge the only kind possible? That cannot be decided sociological if the prohibition against killing another human is a moral absolute, it remains absolute no matter how many societies have or have not recognized its truth; It remains absolute if no society recognizes its truth. How many years was it before man discovered the Pythagorean Theorem? Yet the Pythagorean Theorem did not wait for our discovery of it in order to become true. No doubt the moral conclusions we reach will always be influenced somewhat by the society which constitutes our environment. But once again, the question of the origin of an idea is distinct from the question of its truth. In other words,

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one society may reach an absolutely true conclusion about a given moral value and another society an absolutely false one.

How can we avoid absolutizing our own interests as these fallacies do? How can we avoid making a point *of view* ultimate which will later be seen as only part of a larger perspective? We can avoid this only by finding a point of view for which we can say that it is logically impossible that there be a more fundamental one, i.e., by finding a dimension of the objects of our experience which presupposes no other dimension but to which all others are logically subsequent. Such a point of view will necessarily be universal, i.e., the truths it

discovers will be fundamental to the investigation of all particular areas of our experience. Only if we find such a point of view can we avoid mistaking the whole in favor of a part. The inconsistency of denying the existence of ultimate questions shows that seeking the answers to them is a necessity of human thought. The inconsistencies that result from making limited points of view absolute show the importance of recognizing the true nature of ultimate questions. They are ontological questions, questions about being as such; for existence is that dimension of things which is presupposed to all others and which can therefore presuppose no others.

The idea that the success of human thought depends upon recognizing metaphysics as a universal science whose method and

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point of view are distinct from those of any of the particular science is a main theme of two of the influential books in twentieth century philosophy. The Unity of Philosophical Experience by Gilson and The Degrees of Knowledge, by Maritain. Gilson's thesis is that we cannot avoid asking metaphysical questions and to attempt to do so really amounts to making some limited point of view ultimate thereby taking the part for the whole. Maritain's thesis is the intellectual disaster that results from attempting to use intellectual methods in areas where they are not appropriate and the necessity of our having a metaphysics in order to be able to make sound judgments about the final significance and value of particular limited ways of attempting to answer questions. If for no other reason, then, a sound metaphysics is necessary as an intellectual rudder keeping our thought—life stable. (I should have mentioned earlier that the claim has even been made that it is the creative artist who has the last say on man's deepest questions; this is the claim, for instance of Bergman's movie The Seventh Seal.)

Our previous sheets on ultimate questions provide an answer to the problem raised at the end of section I on the difference between a scientific approach to the world of change and a philosophical approach. The philosophic approach is ontological, the scientific is not. When *we* make the distinction between substance and accident, for instance, we are looking at existing things considered precisely as existents. To verify this just look at the definition of either of them: that which exists—in another, accident that which does not exist-in another substance. The division is made explicitly from the point of view of existence. Contrast this philosophic distinction to the distinction between solids, gases and liquids. These are three different ways of existing but stating the difference between them would not involve direct reference to the concept of existence itself; rather the reference would be to the relative mobility and cohesiveness of molecules among themselves.

Another example is provided by the hylemorphic (matter—form) theory of the make up of things. This theory is put forward as an explanation, a causal account, of changes of certain kinds. By a change of a certain kind I mean a change producing a result which has certain characteristics, which satisfies a certain description. Specifically the hylemorphic theory is intended as *an* explanation at how a change can have a result describable as a substance, a result with the characteristic of being something that does not exist in another. As we said above, scientific theories.