



Matrix, Matter, and Method in Metaphysics

Henry Veatch, *Indiana University*

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“There is a science which investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature. Now this is not the same as any of the so-called special sciences; for none of these others treat universally of being as being. They cut off a part of being and investigate the attributes of this part.”

So Aristotle speaks at the beginning of Book Gamma of the *Metaphysics*, and, as everyone knows, his characterization of the concern of metaphysics has proved to be as perplexing as perennial.

Indeed, one might almost say that because it is in a way so unexceptional, that is the very reason it turns out to be so bafflingly unintelligible. Specifically, to focus upon just one of the characteristic difficulties, it would appear that Aristotle’s proposal of an investigation of being qua being promptly confronts us with a dilemma: if “being” in this connection is to be understood as that which is most universal in the sense of most abstract, it would seem to involve an abstraction from everything, thus leaving being equivalent to literally nothing. On the other hand, if “being” be understood as abstracting from, or leaving out, nothing at all, and hence as including everything, then any statement about being would presumably be an unwarranted determination and limitation of being. Or else it would be a sheer tautology, and as such wholly uninformative.

Nevertheless, suppose that just for the moment we seize the second horn of the dilemma and boldly proclaim that in metaphysics we are concerned with being in the sense of everything. And after all, this does seem to fit in with Aristotle’s way of distinguishing metaphysics from other sciences, in that these “cut off a part of being and investigate the attributes of that part,” whereas presumably metaphysics would be concerned not with a part but with the whole, with everything. Moreover, putting

aside for the moment the obvious logical questions concerning the possibility of meaningful statements about being in the sense of everything, there are, it seems to me, certain other questions concerning what I should like to call, not very felicitously perhaps, the *matrix* of metaphysics — that is to say, its place of genesis and origin, its field of operations, as well as its continuing and ultimate point of reference. In other words, if metaphysics is concerned with just everything, where is one to find everything: where may one encounter it?

Moreover, I propose to answer this question straight off, and before anyone has the chance to leap down my throat and throttle me with all sorts of questions about what one could possibly mean by queries concerning where one can find or encounter no less than everything. For I would suggest that where we encounter everything is right where we are: in our everyday lives, just as human beings. Here, I would suggest, we do, or at least we may, encounter being whole, so to speak; being2/23/16 in its greatest fullness, at least for us; and being not merely from a particular angle or under a particular aspect or for a certain purpose, but being itself, in the concrete and without restriction.

Yes, I am tempted at this point to seize upon Plato's celebrated image of the cave and crudely invert it for my own purposes. For many of you may no doubt be familiar with John Wild's recent ingenious inversion of the Platonic image,¹ in which he high-handedly relegates modern scientists to the cave and then moves joyously out into the light of the sun, where he finds the whole company of the children of light made up principally of phenomenologists, but containing also at least a sprinkling of genuine Kierkegaardian subjective thinkers. Now for my part I should like to invert the inversion of Prof. Wild and, in what I should care to think was a more Aristotelian fashion, to recognize that while Platonic mathematicians and Platonic dialecticians, and perhaps even modern physicists as well, are would-be fugitives from the cave into what they consider to be the regions of light, the fact remains that where being is to be found is, for better or for worse, in the cave and only in the cave.

More specifically, in thus trying to take as the very matrix of metaphysics our simply being here in the everyday world of men, I might turn for a kind of support to the authority of M. Merleau-Ponty, expressed in a most significant passage in the preface to his *Phénoméologie de la Perception*:

The first instruction which Husserl gave phenomenology at its beginning — that it be a “descriptive psychology” or a return “to the things

¹ *Human Freedom and the Social Order: An Essay in Christian Philosophy* (Durham, N.C., 1959), pp. 61–70.

themselves” — is first of all the disavowal of science.... Everything I know of this world, even through science, I know from a point of view which is mine or through an experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the lived world, *le monde vécu*; and if we wish to conceive science itself with rigor, while exactly appreciating its sense and significance, we must first reawaken this experience of the world, for science is its second expression. Science does not have and will never have the same kind of being that the perceived world has, for the simple reason that science is a determination or an explanation of that world.... To return to things themselves is to return to this world as it is *before* knowledge and of which knowledge always *speaks*, and with regard to which all scientific determination is abstract, referential and dependent, just as is geography with regard to the landscape where we first learned what a forest is, or a prairie or a river.²

Moreover, this same recognition, so forcefully articulated by Merleau-Ponty, that no scientific universe, however sophisticated and elaborate and seemingly all-embracing it may be, can be a substitute for, or replace, or displace, the lived world of every day — this same recognition would seem to emerge in the very different philosophical context of so-called linguistic philosophy, where the current fashion seems to be to argue that no artificial or ideal language, however elaborately articulated or subtly constructed it may be, can ever replace, or be a substitute for, or a way of escape from, the all-embracing and inescapable meta-linguistic context of ordinary language.

Nevertheless, putting aside such appeals to and confirmation by current authorities and fashions in philosophy, what further can be said about this everyday world, where, as we have suggested, we encounter everything, and which for that reason we have advanced as being the matrix of metaphysics? For thus far we have suggested little more than that this matrix of metaphysics, this region or locus of being qua being, is total rather than partial, concrete rather than abstract, thick rather than thin, ultimate rather than derivative — and all this presumably simply by way of contrast to the universe, of the special sciences.

But at once you will rejoin with a whole host of questions. For instance, is this matrix of metaphysics, this region of being qua being, structured and articulated, or is it so perfectly concrete and total that any determination of it must be a negation, and any description and articulation of it an abstraction, in the manner of, and pointing

² *Phénoméologie de la Perception*, Foreword, trans. Alice Koller mimeographed, n.d.), pp. 2, 3, 4.

toward, the special sciences rather than metaphysics? Similarly, does not this very contrast of the lived world with the scientific universe, of the cave with the seeming world of light, of the region of being qua being with the fields of the special sciences — does not all this imply limitation rather than totality, a concern with something rather than with everything?

To meet with questions, I propose first of all to single out one particular mark or note of the everyday world of being, which, it seems to me, more than anything else qualifies it to be the matrix of metaphysics. That is what for want of a better term I shall call its practical, or perhaps better its existential, inescapability. And what I mean by this is that whatever our philosophical theories or scientific constructions may be, we none-the-less continue to live and be in the everyday world of men and things; of changes, of times, of seasons; of causes and effects; of motive forces, and inertial resistance; of relative permanence and unmistakable flux; of determinateness and indeterminateness; of capacities and incapacities; of possibilities and actualities; of necessities and contingencies; of birth and death, sickness and health and misery; of being, and being something; of being this, and not being that; of acting and suffering; of knowing and not knowing, etc.

In short, returning to the Aristotelian formula of being qua being, I should now like to offer the following interpretation or gloss upon it: being qua being is simply the being from which we cannot escape or emerge or extricate ourselves; and vice versa, where being is thus inescapable and ineliminable and undeniable and inevitable, is simply the region of being qua being. Nor is there any way in which we can extricate ourselves from, or turn our backs on, or cease to be in, this all-encompassing, ubiquitous world of everyday living and being. Intellectually, it is true, we can assert, if you will, that time is unreal; and doubtless we can get ourselves really to believe such a thing. Likewise, we can analyze the external world into Berkeleyan ideas, or mere phenomena, or perhaps sense data. Or we can deny the many in favor of the one. We can atomize personal identity, dismiss substance as a something-I-know-not-what, effectively demonstrate that the body cannot possibly act on mind or mind on body, and prove that the idea of necessary connection is without any original. But still, however, much we may become convinced of such theories and constructions, can we live them? To paraphrase Hume, when one plays backgammon with one's friends, one simply cannot be — and being itself cannot be — what presumably either oneself or being must be, in the light of one's own theories and intellectual convictions.

Nor would it seem to be otherwise with modern scientific theories and constructions than what we have just suggested is the case with so many of the more traditional philosophical speculations: the divorce between one's theories and one's

being, between what one thinks as a scientist and how one lives as a human being — this divorce is just as patent in the case of the modern physicist, say, as it was in the case of David Hume, the skeptical doubter, and David Hume, the player of backgammon. The modern physicist, for instance, may occupy himself professionally with a world of space-time, of quanta of energy, of relative indeterminacies of position and momentum in microscopic particles, of curious complementarities of wave and particle theories, etc. And yet the same physicist, just as a human being, cannot but live in the same everyday world as the rest of us; the world of ordinary persons and things, of eating and sleeping, of working and playing, of voting in elections, of conversing with friends, of buying cigarettes, and perhaps even of taking down storm windows come springtime.

Yes, there is a passage in Marcel which sounds at first almost obscurantist, but which turns out to be rather strangely true, just because it is so obviously true:

The rationalists have insisted at length, and in a rather laborious way, on the absurdity of clinging to the traditional notions of an absolute ‘height’ and an absolute ‘depth,’ a real ‘up’ and a real ‘down,’ in a world that has been enlightened by mathematical physics. But strangely, it is the rationalists who in the end seem simple-minded; they fail, it seems, to grasp that there are categories of lived experience that cannot be transformed by any scientific discoveries, even those of an Einstein. We feel the earth below us, we see the sky above; the ways of expressing ourselves that derive from that situation could be changed only if the actual mode of our insertion into the universe could be changed; and there is no chance at present of that.³

Now as I see it, the significance for metaphysics of the sort of thing Marcel is here calling attention to, is that it may suggest a certain way of warranting or testing metaphysical truths which, in certain respects at least, is comparable to Aristotle’s proposed warrant for the law of contradiction. For just as Aristotle’s warrant consisted in showing that anyone who would deny the law of contradiction must nevertheless assume it in his very attempt to deny it, so also I would like to argue that anyone who intellectually denies or disregards the being of the everyday world must nevertheless assume it — if not intellectually or theoretically, then at least practically and existentially; and in terms of his own living and being; and, I would even add, in terms of his own thinking just as a human being.

Still, let’s see how this suggested principle of metaphysics, according to which being qua being is identified with being as practically or existentially inescapable and

³ *The Mystery of Being* (Henry Regnery Co.: Chicago, 1950), vol. I, p. 41.

undeniable — how this principle actually works out concretely and specifically as a sort of test or criterion of the soundness or unsoundness of metaphysical pronouncements. And to begin with, suppose we consider a kind of account of being which, while it may not be identified with any one thinker or even school in the present day, nevertheless follows a readily recognizable line; one with which everyone nowadays is familiar, and many perhaps are most sympathetic. Thus, suppose it be said that the being of things — assuming it be permissible to use such an expression — is inseparable or indistinguishable from the language which we use to talk about being. Indeed, suppose that it be further contended that any effort that may be made to consider things as they are in themselves, as contrasted with things as they are in the language we use in order to talk about them — any effort of this sort and pointing in this direction is at best hopeless, and at worst meaningless and unintelligible.

Moreover, as a more or less crude exemplification of such an attitude, one might consider a highly suggestive and really very charming essay by the physicist Werner Heisenberg.⁴ Heisenberg is talking about different scientific systems, Ptolemaic, Newtonian, Einsteinian, etc. And he remarks that in a sense there is really nothing wrong with Ptolemaic astronomy. On the contrary, such an astronomy is not only unimpeachable; it quite literally cannot be improved upon when it comes to navigation in the Mediterranean. But of course, we are no longer concerned just with navigation in the Mediterranean. And as our concerns are extended, the scientific language that sufficed in one context no longer suffices for these new and different concerns of ours. And so it is that Newtonian astronomy becomes a far more adequate system, when it is an affair of circumnavigating the globe, as contrasting with navigation merely within the Mediterranean. And similarly, quantum physics when it becomes a question of dealing not simply with macroscopic phenomena, but rather with subatomic events and happenings.

Moreover, the thrust of what Heisenberg seems to be saying is not that quantum mechanics is necessarily better than Newtonian mechanics or that Ptolemaic astronomy is inferior to Newtonian astronomy. Rather, it's all a matter of range and scope, each system and each scientific language being sufficient and proper, so long as it does not seek to extend itself beyond its appropriate range. In this sense, the one system or the one language does not so much displace or supplant the other, as it rather supplements or complements it, the two being designed for different ranges. It's a matter of complementarity, in short.

⁴ "Recent Changes in the Foundations of Exact Science," in *Philosophic Problems of Nuclear Science* (London, 1952), pp. 11 ff.

But now, having thus briefly articulated this type of metaphysical view which would associate being so intimately with the language or languages which we use to talk about being, it is not hard to imagine what the supposed implications of such a view would be with respect to our general contention that being qua being is to be met with and encountered simply in the everyday world. For we shall be told the everyday world is simply the world of everyday language. Yes, if you wish, it is perhaps even the world of Aristotelian language; of substance and accident, of form and matter, of the four causes, of act and potency, of being and essence, etc. And yet such language is far from being the proper language of metaphysics, the language for talking about being qua being — such a language, we shall be told, has only a limited range, viz., the range simply of the everyday world. Hence no sooner does one move out beyond this narrow range to consider the sorts of questions that arise in the further ranges of physics, chemistry, biology, and modern science generally, than quite different languages become appropriate.

In other words, this criticism merely exploits that difficulty which we mentioned earlier according to which, in trying to confine being qua being to the everyday world and to the lived world, as contrasted with the world of science, we would thereby appear to be limiting being only to a certain sphere, and not considering being as total and all-embracing, as being qua being, in other words.

Moreover, it is in a somewhat similar vein — albeit from out of a quite different philosophical context from Heisenberg's — that M. Merleau-Ponty, whom we quoted so approvingly earlier, would appear to push his "return to things themselves" and his quest for the lived world, *le monde vécu*. For in his eyes, not only does the world of science not have "the same kind of being that the perceived world has," but equally the common sense world, the world that we have called the everyday world — this, too, is in its own way but a "determination or an explanation" of the lived world. It, too, involves determinations which, with reference to the lived world, are "abstract, referential, and dependent." It, too, just does not "have the same kind of being that the perceived world has." In other words, for Merleau-Ponty the lived world is a pre-predicative, pre-objective world; it is the world as it is before knowledge, and of which knowledge always speaks.

Nevertheless, plausible as considerations such as these may seem, can they meet that particular test of metaphysical genuineness or authenticity that we have been proposing? Can one actually live and behave — if I may thus rather forcibly convert an intransitive verb in to a transitive one — such convictions which would make all being or reality relative to our human language forms, or to our categories of understanding, or to the free projects of human *Dasein*? To see that one cannot do

this, and that it is impossible practically, and in terms of one's being and living, to emerge or escape from the everyday world, structured and articulated in the largely Aristotelian fashion that it seems to me that it is — to see this I suggest that we consider but one example, an example that presents itself almost immediately following certain of those sentences which we quoted earlier from Merleau-Ponty. For having so effectively argued that any articulated universe, be it that of science or that of common sense, is but a “determination or an explanation” of the lived world and hence is “abstract, referential, and dependent” with respect to it, Merleau-Ponty goes on to observe: “I am not a ‘living being’ or even a ‘man’ or even a ‘mind,’ with all the characteristics which zoology, social anatomy or experimental psychology recognize by these products of nature or of history: I am the absolute source.”⁵ Now I ask you, even for a Frenchman, and even for a Frenchman who professes and looks down upon the world from such an academic pinnacle as the Collège de France, would it not be going just a little bit far for such a man to act and behave and live as if he were *the absolute source*? Intellectually, he may believe this, of course; and philosophically, the proposal makes for an unusually fascinating and fecund line of philosophical speculation. But practically and humanly speaking, can Merleau-Ponty, or anyone else, really take it to be so? When he plays backgammon with his friends — supposing a Frenchman ever to do such a thing — does he really and consistently take himself for the absolute source? If he did, I am sure that this would not only break up the game, but his friendships as well.

And more generally, I would suggest that that of the multiple variants on Kant's Copernican Revolution, being Cassirer's or Heidegger's or Wittgenstein's, or whosoever else — none of these, I would submit, can meet our proposed test of metaphysical authenticity. For each and all of these philosophical enterprises in Copernican Revolution have the effect of moving the human subject into a humanly untenable and unlivable position. To be sure, for the somewhat limited purposes of, say, justifying Newtonian physics, or of arousing the human individual to the responsibilities of his own freedom, or of making plausible the apparent legitimacy and even requirement of alternative language systems, these various Copernican proposals, if we may so term them, are exceedingly useful and fruitful, not to say ingenious. But considered as metaphysics, i.e., considered as accounts of being qua being, they fail to capture being in its existential inescapability — beings as we know it in living it and being it.

Very well, then; so to conceive the matrix of metaphysics would seem at the same time to commit us to a certain conception of the matter and stuff of metaphysics. More

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 3.

specifically, as I see it, on such a view, the stuff and sense of metaphysics — though many might suspect it to be more than the stuff and nonsense of metaphysics — will consist in understanding being more or less after the manner of traditional Aristotelian realism. To be is to be a substance, or a quantity or quality or an activity or a relation or what not of a substance; to be is to be either actually thus and so, or perhaps only able to be or capable of being thus and so; to be is to be ordered to a certain characteristic perfection or completion, or else to be actually complete and perfect, ἐντελέγεια; to be is to have a sufficient reason for one's being; to be is both to be and to something; to be is to be what one is and not something else; etc., etc.

Now each and all of those somewhat stilted and awkward-sounding phrases represent but so many attempts at putting into formulas the salient features and traits of the being of our everyday world — “the world loved by children and described by their philosophy, Aristotle,” as Prof. Balz is reported to have been wont to say, — a characterization which doubtless falls short of being either accurate or just so far as Aristotle is concerned, but which may well serve to point up the childishness of at least one of the presidential addresses delivered before the M.S.A.

But be this as it may, there is one rather interesting and even questionable feature of what might be called the manner and method of metaphysics, as this is reflected in these same formulas that are designed to express the being of our everyday lived world. For in the currently hostile and comparatively anti-metaphysical environment of present day English and American philosophy, the question is almost certain to be asked whether such metaphysical formulas — i.e., such supposed truths about being — are to be regarded as analytic truths or synthetic truths, necessary truths or contingent truths, logical truths or factual truths.

Nor will anyone fail to recognize that a question of this sort merely reflects the current tendency to try to understand the nature of metaphysics — or of any other discipline, for that matter, be it mathematics or science or what not — not in terms of the logical character of the language in which it is expressed. Likewise, no one will fail to recognize the motivation behind such a question. For it is a common supposition of a great deal of contemporary philosophizing that all truths (and, *mutatis mutandis*, all inferences) must be either analytic or synthetic.

Moreover, if a truth is analytic, then it is held to be necessary, a priori certain, and such that its opposite would be simply inconceivable and even self-contradictory. At the same time, such analytic truths are considered to have purchased their necessity and certainty at the price of being purely formal, non-factual, and completely uninformative. And such indeed, is precisely the character of the truths of

mathematics and logic — at least, so we are told. On the other hand, and by way of contrast, synthetic truths are held to be factual and informative, but at the cost of being contingent rather than necessary, a posteriori rather than a prior, dubitable rather than certain. And such is the character of all scientific truths — again, so we are told.

Where, then, do the truths of metaphysics fit into the picture? Well, we need hardly be told that the point of the original question was simply to show that the truths of metaphysics don't fit into the picture at all. For that is just the trouble with metaphysical statements, on the current view: they try to have the best of both worlds, to be both necessary and factual, both a prior certain and informative, both truths of reason and truths of fact. And yet such attempts at having your cake and eating it too just will not get by, at least not in logic, however much in metaphysics one may think one can get by with it by simply blinking the exigencies of logic; no statement can possibly be at the same time both analytic and synthetic, both a logical truth and a factual truth. And if such a ruling seems to be severe to the point of not just confining metaphysics, but of actually annihilating it, then so much the worse for metaphysics.

Now to the substance of this charge that metaphysical statements — or at least most of them — pretend, in the very nature of the case, to be both necessary and factual, both such that their opposites are self-contradictory⁶ and at the same time informative — to this charge we shall readily plead guilty on behalf of metaphysics. But to the consequence, that metaphysics is thereby rendered illegitimate and that metaphysical truths, so far from being truths, are to be ruled out as being simply logically or semantically improper statements — this consequence we should like to try to rebut as vigorously as possible

First, then, that metaphysical statements — at least many of them or most of them — put themselves forward as being both necessary truths and truths about being — this would seem evident both in the nature of the case and in the light of specific examples. It is evident in the nature of the case, simply because questions of what and of why, when they are aimed at finding what being is and what the causes of being are — these are obviously questions about being and about facts and about what is the case; but they are also questions which can only be answered ultimately in statements that involve necessity. For that something is what it is, or that it is, or is the way it is, on such and such grounds and through such and such causes — can scarcely be statements of fact to the exclusion of all necessity. This character of metaphysical statements as being alike necessary and factual is equally evident if we but consider specific examples. For instance, take Leibniz's celebrated contention — one that is

⁶ This statement we shall wish to qualify somewhat in the sequel.

still operative today among the partisans of logical atomism — that if there are composites there must be simples.⁷ Clearly this is advanced as being a necessary truth, and yet at the same time it is equally clear that with the affirmation of the antecedent, Leibniz wants to conclude that there are simples in fact. Or again, consider a metaphysical statement of a more Aristotelian character: in order for “a” to become “b,” it must be “b” in potency. Or as further examples: contingent facts presuppose adequate causes; all choices are choices of the good, either real or apparent; being involves both being and being something; there can be no such thing as change, as contrasted with mere succession, without there being something that changes.

No are further examples necessary. For it should be only too apparent by now that this entire effort, which I have been trying to represent as being not atypical of metaphysics — this effort to somehow merge necessary truth and factual truth is but a manifestation of a still deeper-seated determination to find the locus and ground of necessity and universality and of intelligibility generally, right in being and in fact itself. As contrasted with the more extreme forms of both nominalism and realism — to shift the setting and context to the question slightly — the concern that we are here presenting as a characteristically metaphysical concern is one of keeping the intelligible and the real, the necessary and the factual, the universal and the particular, somehow together and not wholly distinct and separate, and so that never the twain shall meet — at least not ontologically, however much they may meet and merge phenomenally, or phenomenologically, or by dint of some Copernican Revolution in philosophy.

Very well, then, the question as to the possibility of metaphysics that are raised by so many contemporary analytic philosophers, or linguistic or logical analysts, or whatever you want to call them, are really questions as to the very intelligibility of being itself. Moreover, they are serious questions, and the logical or linguistic considerations on which they turn must be faced up to quite honestly. Reduced to their very lowest terms, it seems to me that such considerations come down to something like this. If metaphysical truths, or any truths for that matter, are to be necessary truths, then that must mean that there are truths the opposite of which would be self-contradictory. But what sort of a truth would this be? Well, for its opposite to be self-contradictory must mean that such an opposite is presumably of the form “A is non-A.” For this, or something analogous to it or reducible to it, must be what one means by something’s being self-contradictory. But if the opposite of a necessary truth must

⁷ “And there must be simple substances, since there are compounds; for a compound is nothing but a collection or *aggregatum* of simple things.” *The Monadology*, p. 2.

needs be of the form “A is non-A,” then such a necessary truth can only be of the form “A is A” — in other words, a pure tautology.

Moreover, for us to know that a tautology is true or that a contradiction is false, we need to know nothing of the specific content of the propositions involved, i.e., we need to know nothing of the specific things, entities, happenings, or qualities that the propositions in question profess to be about. Instead, it is by their form alone that we can tell whether statements that are tautologies are true, or those that are contradictions are false. In other words, to know that a statement of the form “A is A” is true or that one of the form “A is non-A” is false, we need to know nothing whatsoever of the world or of the things in it: rather it depends simply on the form of the statement or proposition. In other words, what seems to be involved here is a mere logical truth or linguistic truth, a truth in which, to paraphrase Quine, only the logical words occur essentially, all others vacuously.

But now, if the truth of a tautology (or the falsity of a contradiction) does not depend on the content of the proposition — indeed, does not depend on anything whatever in the real world — then such a truth could hardly be a truth about the real world, or even a truth about anything at all. Rather it’s a mere formal truth, vacuous and uninformative. “All black cats are black” tells us nothing about black cats; nor do we convey any information about the weather — to use a most celebrated example — when we say it rains or it doesn’t rain.

In light of such an analysis, then, it is easy to round on the supposed necessary truths of metaphysics and to show that they are nothing but tautologies, which, so far from informing us about being qua being or the *natura rerum*, inform us of nothing at all. Indeed, “If there are composites, there must be simples” would appear to be on all fours with “If he is a younger son, he is a brother”; or “All change involves something that changes” with “All bachelors are male.”

Nor would it seem to do much good to protest that the metaphysical statements in these comparisons do really seem to be saying something, whereas “If he is a younger son, he is a brother” or “All bachelors are male” are patently no more than verbal or linguistic truths. For only a little reflection suffices to show that in both cases alike the test or criterion of the truths’ necessity is just the same. Thus, why do we say that all bachelors are male? Because to say anything else would be tantamount to saying that a bachelor was not a bachelor; it being simply a part of the meaning or definition of the word “bachelor” that such a person be male. It’s thus really tantamount to saying that a bachelor is a bachelor; or a better analogy might be with the statement “All black cats are black.”

Nor is the necessity of “If there are composites, there are simples” any different in kind. For to consider this a necessary truth is to consider that its opposite is self-contradictory. And on what grounds can one suppose that it is self-contradictory to assert that composites might exist without simples. Presumably, the only ground is that it is a part of the very meaning of the word “composite” that a composite should be composed ultimately of simples. Hence a composite that was not composed of simples just wouldn't be a composite. In other words, for a metaphysical statement, or any other statement for that matter, to be necessary in the sense that its opposite is self-contradictory, can only mean that the statement itself is a bare tautology, telling us no more than that A is A, and conveying no information at all.

Apparently, then, whatever may be true of life, it would certainly seem to be true of metaphysics, that it is “but a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” And yet before we write off metaphysics completely, I wonder if its utter annihilation and thorough devastation at the hands of analytically minded philosophers may not be shown to have been due to a curious, but none-the-less rather simple, confusion — a confusion, dare I add, which is but logical in character! For, as I see it, the effort to reckon all necessary truths as mere tautologies rests on a confusion of the character of one's logical instrument — in this case the sentence or proposition — with the character of what such a proposition is about. Or as I might rather prefer to put it, a confusion of the character of one's intentional instrument with the character of the object intended.

Thus why may not one look at the matter this way? Take an ordinary categorical proposition of the traditional Aristotle subject-predicate type, and suppose one asks about the various ways in which the predicate concept may be regarded as being related to the subject in such propositions. In all likelihood, the answer one would get would be that either the predicate is analytically contained in the subject, or its relation to the subject is no more than synthetic. But it does seem to me that the analytic-synthetic dichotomy is not merely over-simple in this connection; it is downright misleading. In place of it, suppose we consider the older doctrine of predicables, according to which the predicate concept will be either the genus, the differentia, the species, the property, or the accident of the subject. Taking just the first four of these, we may say in each case the predicate expresses what the subject is, and the relation of subject to predicate is but the relation of something to its own “what,” to what it is, either essentially, or at least in virtue of its own nature or essence.⁸

⁸ *sc.*, in the case of the so-called “properties.”

Clearly, though, nothing can be other than what it is essentially. Hence the assertion that S is P, if it involve any one of these four senses of predicability, is, in form at least, a tautology, or, as I should prefer to say, a relation of identity; viz., S is its own “what”; it is what it is. For this reason, to say “Socrates is a man,” or “Man is an animal” — any one of these cases, the assertion, if it be true, asserts what is necessarily the case, for neither Socrates nor any human can possibly be other than what he is. Indeed, to suppose otherwise would be simply self-contradictory.

But now note that even granting all this, it does not seem to follow that such statements could not be false. Men, after all, might not be rational; our understanding as to what human nature is or involves might quite conceivably have been mistaken all along. Yes, it is even conceivable that Socrates was perhaps not really a human being either, but a god, maybe, or maybe just a kind of torpedo fish. For that matter, just because a predicable relationship is an essential one, or if you will a necessary one, or a relation of identity, or whatever you want to call it — that certainly does not mean that propositions involving such a relationship could not be false, that they could only be true.

But how does one explain this? Is it not really rather simple? The logical relationship that holds between the subject and predicate in a given proposition is not the relationship which that proposition intends or asserts to be the case in reality. Thus I may assert that men are rational or that they are animals, and I may assert this as being necessary and as being what men are essentially and necessarily. Yes, I can even mean or intend that for a man to be human and at the same time not rational would be tantamount to a human being’s being human and also not human. That is, I would suppose that any such state of affairs as that of a person’s being human and also not human would be a downright contradictory state of affairs. And yet I could perfectly well be mistaken; this might not be what human beings are at all, I could be just plain wrong about what men are essentially or necessarily. In other words, the assertion of a necessity, the assertion that something has to be a certain way or otherwise a flat contradiction would prevail — this sort of assertion can perfectly well be false. Not only that, but in making such an assertion of necessity, I clearly recognize that I might be wrong — or if I don’t, God help me!

On the other hand, and at the same time, in any such assertion of necessity, the logical form or structure of my assertion is a relation of identity; the S-term, in being related to the P, is being related simply to what I take S to be, to what I consider S is. The relation of S to P is really no more than a relation of S to S, or so it would seem. And yet in using the relation of identity or such a tautology as the instrument of my assertion, what I thereby assert is not any such identity or tautology in fact or in

reality. Or to put it rather more crudely and simply, while I may use a relation of subject to predicate in order to make an assertion, what I thereby assert is clearly no mere relation of subject to predicate. Accordingly, the necessity which is the object of my assertion is one in regard to which I can perfectly well be mistaken; nor must any such real necessity, or necessity in fact be confused with what might be called the tautological character of the form in which I make the assertion.

Of course, it is always possible to shift the object of one's assertion from an object in first intention to an object in second intention, and then one will be concerned only with what might be called the purely tautological character of the logical form or structure of one's assertion. For instance, to use as an illustration our earlier example from Leibniz: "If there are composites, there must be simples." Now, taking this as a metaphysical statement which purports to assert a real necessity or necessity in fact, viz., that there cannot be such things as composites without there being simples, then this statement is one in respect to which I might well be mistaken. To be sure, I may not be too clear as to just how there might be composites without simples; and yet it is conceivable that there might be something in the nature of the case here that I had overlooked or was mistaken about. After all, Aristotle's dictum that a magnitude is infinitely divisible but not infinitely divided offers at least a hint as to how there might possibly be actual compounds without there being actual simples.

On the other hand, shifting my intention from possible real composites and simples to the mere word "composite" or the mere concepts of "composite" and "simple," then the situation changes immediately. Now the sentence "If there are composites, there must be simples" could of course never be false, simply because the sentence does not do more than express the way I am using the words "composite" and "simple," or the way I have chosen to define these concepts. Here there is not just an identity or tautology in the form of my assertion, but an actual assertion of an identity and a tautology; and as such it is clearly a mere linguistic or logical truth, simply because it is an assertion of no more than a linguistic or logical connection between subject and predicate in a sentence or proposition. Little wonder that it should tell us nothing, or give us no information about the world.

But with this, it would seem that we had surely drawn the sting from much of the currently fashionable criticism directed against metaphysics. For in maintaining that metaphysical statements, in "their vaulting ambition" of wanting to be necessary truths, o'er leap themselves and fall into mere uninformative tautologies — in maintaining this, the latter-day critics of metaphysics have committed what would seem to be a rather elementary logical blunder. They have confused the character of that which metaphysical statements are about with the character of the logical form in

which such statements are couched and made. Of course, the bare form of any statement that involves an essential predicable relationship of predicate to subject will be a form that involves a relating of that subject to itself or to what it is. In this sense, it will be formally a relation of something to itself, a kind of relation of identity, in other words. And yet this does not mean that what one asserts in using such a form to make a statement is not more than “S-is-itself” or the “S-is-what-it-is” relation in which that statement is formulated or propounded. Furthermore, while the assertion of a mere identity or tautology is most assuredly an assertion which cannot be false, the use of such a relation of identity or tautology in order to assert a real necessity in things is something else again, and something which certainly can be false.

“And yet,” you may say, “just how can one tell in a given case just which one has, an assertion of a tautology or of a metaphysical necessity? Or better, just how can one be sure that the necessity which one attributes to things, when one asserts the ‘what’ of a thing or the ‘why’ of a thing, is anything more than the mere linguistic or logical necessity of one’s verbal definitions and the way one uses words? For instance, when one feels the force of that supposed metaphysical necessity which Leibniz is contending for when he says, “If there are composites, there must be simples,” how does one know but what such necessity amounts to is no more than the purely tautological necessity of using the word ‘composite’ in such a way that it involves ‘being composed of simples’ as part of its very meaning?”

Alas, there is no way of knowing for certain and in every case the source and kind of necessity that is involved in one’s assertions. There is no infallible criterion for distinguishing metaphysical from mere tautological necessity. But so what? True, the fallibility of all criteria of distinction in such cases can only mean that a priori speculation in metaphysics, the sort of things which Kant called dogmatism, is ruled out for good and all. But it does not mean that the distinction itself is not a valid one, or that metaphysics or metaphysical necessity themselves are to be ruled out for good and all. On the contrary, why might not one say that such metaphysical necessity, as contrasted with mere logical or linguistic necessity, is to be found only there where one finds that practical or existential inescapability of being itself, of which we spoke in the first part of this paper, and which we should now like to come back to as being the only proper matrix from out of which and within which the necessary truths of metaphysics can find their origin, and their locus, and their continued sustenance? 