

Ontology

What is there, and what do we mean by “there” anyway?

This, in a nutshell, is what philosophy has focused on for centuries, and this is what you’ll get to think more about here.

Philosophers think about ontology (being or existence) by using theories about what the world is made of, what this stuff is capable of doing, and whether reality is ordered in any particular way.

Throughout history, one of the really big ideas about existence has been God. In talking about existence, this chapter focuses on how philosophers have dealt with God. (You can read more about God and philosophy in Chapters 9 and 12.)

In This Chapter

- How philosophers think about being
- Physical and metaphysical reality
- Is there a God?
- How being relates to knowing

Early Theories

Even before formal schools of philosophy got started, people were inventing myths to help explain reality. These myths usually portrayed natural forces as people or gods. By thinking about natural forces in human terms, people made sense of the strange and mysterious things going on around them: rain, thunder, sunshine, the seasons, birth, growth, death.

However, these myths did not attempt to explain what reality is physically made of; they were more concerned with explaining how reality affects human activities and relationships. Myths personified nature—it was one big, not-so-happy family. Earth is our mother, the sun or sky is Dad, the sea is a weird uncle, and the hill to the north is a distant cousin. Storms may be fights; a nice day may mean that the sky-daddy has found a new girlfriend; winter comes when Earth-mama finds out about daddy's new girlfriend and gives everyone the cold treatment.



REALITY CHECK

Although it is useful to distinguish the ways myth and philosophy explain reality, the two ways of explaining are not totally separate. In fact, some consider philosophy itself a kind of mythmaking. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida describes philosophy as “white mythology”—mythology that has had all the familiar images bleached out of it.

The first philosophers differed from the mythmakers by explaining reality in more general, less familiar terms. The ancient Greek philosopher Thales, sometimes considered the first philosopher, said that all things were made out of water—everything that exists is really water in a more or less complicated form. Other early philosophers believed that everything was made of four “elements”: earth, air, fire, and water. Still others thought the world was made of a single substance that could be broken down into tiny, indivisible particles called atoms.

These early theories about reality are not “scientific” as the word is used today—that is, they do not result from experimental tests or controlled observation. But they are impersonal and suggest rules for the makeup of reality and how it is organized. These early philosophers wanted to know not only what reality is, but also how it is shaped and how it works. They came up with *theories*, rather than stories, to answer their questions.

Philosophy and Technology

Technological developments helped philosophers learn to think about reality in terms of impersonal rules of order. Practical arts like geometry, navigation, and medicine, for example, were developing in ancient Greece at about the time of the first philosophers. In fact, one of them, Pythagoras, is also known as an important mathematician. A number of other early philosophers were also extremely interested in math.



FASCINATING FACT

Mathematics was so important to Plato that he had the words "Let no one enter who has not studied mathematics" inscribed over the entrance to his Academy.

Math and other technological arts helped people stop thinking about reality as a big family of bickering gods and start seeing the world as being made of things you can use to make more things, arranged according to mathematical rules. Craftsmen and artisans started it all by inventing technical terms for their work. Philosophers went even further by creating terms for talking about reality. Many of these terms refer to physical reality, like atoms and the elements.

Metaphysics

Philosophers also came up with *metaphysical* terms, which refer not to what reality is physically made of, but to how it is organized and how it works. Some of the more famous metaphysical terms are *forms*, *substance*, *essence*, *categories*, *spirit*, *monads*, and *noumena*. God, too, is a metaphysical concept.



DEFINITION

Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that studies the makeup, function, and organization of reality in general. Metaphysics is also used more specifically to refer to those aspects of reality that cannot be observed and measured, such as God and virtue.

Philosophers, of course, have come up with all kinds of theories about reality. Each new philosophical system needs another set of metaphysical terms to describe its version of reality. Some of these metaphysical terms are pretty far-out—in more ways than one! In order to understand the philosophy of being and metaphysics, let me give you an overview of how metaphysical ideas have been used and have changed through history. This will help you see why metaphysical ideas are significant.

Is There a God?

Throughout the Middle Ages in Europe and the Middle East, a philosophical battle was waged between religious authorities on one side, who felt that religious doctrine should be accepted on faith alone, and religious philosophers on the other, who were interested in combining religious ideas with the teaching of the Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle.

In some cases, like that of the German monk and philosopher Meister Eckhart, the attempt to square philosophy with religion resulted in charges of heresy (the crime of having religious beliefs that contradict those of established religion). Eckhart made claims that sounded like he thought God was nothing more than nature itself and that this God/nature created itself. These ideas made the German bishops so nervous they punished Eckhart. Many philosophers, though, found success in bringing philosophical ideas based on reason and nature together with accepted religious beliefs. This was true of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic philosophers.



REALITY CHECK

You might think that philosophers of the Middle Ages used philosophical ideas to prove God's existence because they wanted to encourage people to believe in God. Actually, though, God was so widely accepted that there was little point in trying to convince people—practically everyone already believed in God. A more likely reason for using philosophy in this way was to show that philosophy was not sacrilegious. Although philosophers seemed to be using philosophy to defend God, they were, in effect, using God to defend philosophy!

As a result, philosophy as practiced by the Greeks became acceptable to the new religions, Christianity and Islam. In the West, many of the most important medieval philosophers practiced one of these religions. They studied existence both as philosophers and as theologians, trying to figure out how reality works for its own sake, and trying to figure out what reality reveals about God.

The Ontological Proof of God

These philosophers used philosophical ideas about being to prove the existence of God. For example, one argument goes that because the world exists, it must have a cause, namely, God. Might the whole thing have been an accident? No, reasoned the medieval philosophers, because reality seems so well organized and able to support life that God must have planned it.

But maybe what seems planned was still just accidental, and maybe the organization that seems to indicate the existence of God is really due to the way people think. What then? Maybe order is just an idea in people's minds.

To this objection the medieval philosophers offered their most imaginative idea of all: they reasoned that the idea of God is the most perfect idea possible. They also argued that one characteristic of perfection is existence. God *must* therefore exist. This argument is known as the “ontological proof” of God’s existence.

**FASCINATING FACT**

Many Christian philosophers believed that we can learn about God from two “books.” The first book is the Bible and the second “book” is the world itself, which, if “read” in the right way, can yield divine knowledge.

Ontology and Knowledge

The ontological proof shows that when you push hard enough on the idea of *being*, the question of *knowing* comes up. To put it another way, whether or not you accept any one explanation of reality depends partly on the question of how you know things, and how the ability to know things fits in with the question of being.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. You’ll have to wait until Chapter 3 to see how the study of knowing figures into philosophy in general. For now, the point to understand is that the way we think about knowledge influences how we think about God.

Many philosophers in the West have associated God with knowledge. Some have said that human beings are not capable of understanding God, so we have to take his existence on faith. Others said that knowledge reveals God’s nature.

One of the more astonishing examples of this second view was put forward by the Portuguese-Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who believed that matter itself could think! He believed that things like rocks and water and trees and tile grout—all of reality—are alive and capable of knowing—a view called *vitalism*.

Not only can reality think, said Spinoza, but reality itself *is* God. God and nature, for Spinoza, are two sides of the same coin.

**DEFINITION**

A **vitalist** believes that everything that makes up reality is alive and capable of thinking. A **dualist** believes that reality can be separated into two components: material and spiritual. The spiritual part of reality makes thinking and knowledge possible.

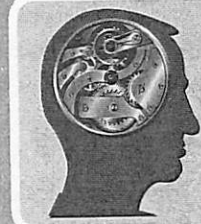
Dualism vs. Materialism

As you might imagine, Spinoza's ideas attracted a lot of attention—and criticism—from other philosophers and theologians. A more popular and influential belief about the relationship between being and knowing is *dualism*, the idea that the world is made up of material and spiritual aspects. The spiritual aspects of reality are those capable of thinking, while the material aspects cannot think. Spiritual reality includes the human mind.



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The most famous dualist of the seventeenth century was the French philosopher René Descartes. He believed that a spiritual portion of the mind allows us to understand perceptions that are conveyed to us physically by our senses. Descartes believed that the spiritual portion of reality was confined to God and the human mind alone; the rest of reality was simply physical. Descartes's dualism was widely accepted by other philosophers and eventually by theologians as well.

Descartes's dualism made a neat separation between physical and metaphysical reality. An important result of this separation was that it allowed philosophers and scientists to study the natural world without having to worry about supernatural questions. In fact, since Descartes's time, many philosophers have argued that we should stop asking metaphysical questions—questions about God and anything else that we can't verify through observation.

Even so, other philosophers continued to see knowledge itself as metaphysical, much as Descartes did. Starting in Descartes's time—the seventeenth century—philosophers began arguing for or against two distinct ways of relating being to knowing. These ways are known as *rationalism* and *empiricism*. Rationalism sees knowledge as metaphysical, existing independently of physical reality. Empiricism, on the other hand, sees knowledge as based on observable, physical reality. We'll learn more about rationalism and empiricism in Chapter 3, which covers epistemology, or knowing.



Philoso-Fact

Here are some of the more important ideas philosophers have come up with to understand being and how it works:



Plato

Perfect, unchanging, ideal forms lend order and understanding to physical reality



Aristotle

Each identifiable thing has an essence that supplies it with a purpose culminating in the prime mover



Thomas Aquinas

Reality was created by God according to his plan (confirmed by the "ontological proof")



Spinoza

Reality is all one substance, including God and nature; everything that exists is a part of this one substance, which is capable of thought (vitalism)



Descartes

Physical reality works according to mechanical principles. In addition, there is spiritual reality, including God and the mind, that can think (dualism)

The Least You Need to Know

- The first ancient Greek philosophers made a distinction between physical reality and human social reality.
- Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that studies how reality functions. The term is also used to refer to whatever cannot be verified through observation, including God.
- Ideas about God often depend on ideas about knowing.
- Descartes theorized a clear separation of physical and metaphysical reality in the seventeenth century.