

Four Pages of Meat-and-Potatoes Philosophy for Use with *Philosophy and American Television* Interdisciplinary Course, University of Southern Denmark, Spring 2005. Instructor: Cynthia M. Grund

"The 4 Reals: A Quick and Dirty Guide to Metaphysics and Related Topics – Part One"

We recall the four bullet points on a PowerPoint slide which was shown several times:

- **Real 1:** The substrate, the ultimate which underlies "what there is."
- **Real 2:** Material (as opposed to ideal/immaterial)
- **Real 3:** The opposite of illusory, the opposite of something which is "hallucinated."
- **Real 4:** Authentic

Some comments:

According to some philosophical usage of the term, **Real 1** is the level at which the legitimate meaning of the term "metaphysics" comes into play: in such contexts, **metaphysics** deals with the **ultimate nature** of reality. Questions as to "what there is" - whose ultimate nature then may be discussed - are often regarded as being the subject area of **ontology**. One has to be careful: in many philosophical contexts, these two terms are used interchangeably.

Note, for example, the comment on p. xiv of the book on our syllabus *Is Data Human: The Metaphysics of Star Trek* by Richard Hanley (New York: Basic Books. 1997): "Metaphysics - literally, 'after physics' - is the branch of philosophy that explores the nature of existence."

Another comment worth bearing in mind from *Is Data Human*:

As for metaphysics, it can be relatively pure or relatively applied. *Star Trek* raises some pure metaphysical issues, as in *TNG*: "Where No One Has Gone Before," when young Wesley Crusher wonders whether thought is the basis of all existence. This book focuses instead on applied metaphysics- that is, upon metaphysical issues that matter to the daily lives of persons such as ourselves" (p. xvii).

Real 2 – "material" - is one of the choices for the character of whatever is **Real 1**. (For more on this, please see "The 4 Reals: A Quick and Dirty Guide to Metaphysics and Related Topics – Part Two.")

Real 3 and **Real 4**, although philosophically interesting in their own right, are not uses of the word "real" which have very much bearing on metaphysics, although some might argue that Real 3 could be interesting in the context of at least an initial examination of Berkeley's idealism/immaterialism.

Two very nice, thought-provoking texts on metaphysics, for those who would like to learn more about it, are:

1. *Language, Truth and Logic* by Alfred Jules Ayer (New York: Dover Publications, 1936, 1946). Here pp. 33-45 were a source of inspiration with regard to *The Four Reals*.
2. "Truth and False in Metaphysics," by W.H. Walsh, *Filosofia*, November, 1959.

In addition, a textbook, which I used during the late eighties and early nineties while teaching in the US, and which was an excellent pedagogical tool, was *Fundamentals of Philosophy* by David Stewart and H. Gene Blocker, **Second Edition** (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987). This edition, unfortunately, is out-of-print, and the editions that have replaced it which I have seen do not appear to be as good for the purposes of teaching "meat-and-potatoes" introductory philosophy. Much of what appears in these four pages of handouts arose as blackboard (the kind one uses together with chalk. . . .) notes that I found to be useful while teaching courses for which this book served as a text. In addition, I have often used some of this material to supplement other introductory textbooks in philosophy which I used subsequent to Stewart and Blocker.

We now take a closer look at **Real 2: Material (as opposed to ideal/immaterial)**.

"Material" is understood as meaning "mind-independent" in philosophical contexts. The metaphysical view that – ultimately – reality is material, is, not surprisingly, called **materialism**. Stewart and Blocker (see previous page) give a short and sweet definition on page G-5:

Materialism: The view that all reality is matter. Anything that is real is to be explained in terms of matter and the motion of matter.

The opposite of material is then **immaterial** or **ideal**, understood as "mind-independent."

Idealism:

The characterization of materialism contra idealism in terms of mind-dependence or mind-independence gives us a very nice way to sort and categorize various standpoints on idealism in metaphysics by asking "Whose mind?" and "What sort of dependence?" Here are a few samples:

Platonic idealism: The "where" or "mind" in which Platonic "ideas" or "forms" are situated is not made particularly clear. The sort of dependence which our everyday "reality" has on these ideas, however, is comparable with what we might nowadays call "a cheap imitation" or a "cheap copy." The realm of hierarchically ordered realm of ideas is where true reality is to be found to a degree which increases as the hierarchy is ascended. This can be contrasted with

Berkeley's idealism/immaterialism: Here, the "mind" at issue is that of each of us human subjects, supplemented, when necessary, by God's mind. Thus, this is a sort of **subjective idealism**. The relationship between the ideas and reality is one of constitution: all that there *is* are minds and what is made up of ideas. We only con ourselves into thinking that there is something such as matter.

Hegelian idealism: Grossly simplified, one could say that here, the "mind" is a sort of "world soul." This kind of idealism thus gets tagged as **absolute idealism**. The dependence of reality on this sort of "idea" might usefully be understood as a "striving towards" which, as time goes by, gets closer to achieving this goal. As Stewart and Blocker (see previous page) write on page 160: "Where the subjective idealist sees the world as a collection of minds and their ideas, the absolute idealist sees everything in the world as a part of one all-embracing universal mind."

Dualism:

Metaphysical dualism is the standpoint that – ultimately – reality is to some extent (irreducibly) mind-dependent, and to some extent it is (irreducibly) mind-independent. Descartes was a well-known exponent of metaphysical dualism, which resulted in the famous mind-body problem: If mind and body are two such entirely different sorts of things, how can we account for the interaction of one upon the other?

”Epistemology: The Back Story”

Whereas materialism and idealism provided the main pair of opposites within metaphysics, with dualism being a compromise position in which both materialism and idealism play a role, traditionally, the two driving alternatives within epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, are rationalism and empiricism. Within epistemology, dualist positions are also possible. A word to the wise: Spend a few minutes thinking about the details regarding materialism v. idealism in metaphysics contrasted with the details regarding empiricism v. rationalism in epistemology. A long teaching career has taught me that students can save themselves many hours of confusion and unhappiness by following this suggestion.

Roughly speaking, one might say that metaphysics/ontology concerns itself with the ultimate nature of what there is and what there is, the ultimate nature of which is being queried, while epistemology concerns itself with: how can we know anything about what there is and the way it is?

Rationalism: Stewart and Blocker p. G-6:

“The view that appeals to reason, not the senses, as the source of knowledge. In its most extreme form, rationalism insists that *all* knowledge is derived from reason.”

Descartes is often characterized as a rationalist. There are important nuances attendant to this attribution, but they are beyond the scope of this outline.

Empiricism: Stewart and Blocker p. G-3:

“The view that all human knowledge is derived from that senses.”

Locke and Hume are often cited as being examples of empiricists. In certain respects, Hume’s acceptance of empiricism led to

Skepticism: Stewart and Blocker p. G-6:

“The view that certain kind of knowledge are impossible to obtain.”

Hume found himself confronted with skepticism with regard to the famous problem of induction, where he was obliged to conclude that certain kinds of generalizations have no foundation other than our propensity to believe that they are the case, and thus do not qualify as knowledge.

Critical Idealism: Kant’s great achievement, in which he posited and worked out a sort of dualism in which the constitution of the human mind, including the way in which it reasons, organizes the input provided by experience (though the senses) in ways which guarantee knowledge of the world.

. . . and, breaking out of the context circumscribed by rationalism and empiricism, we must not forget

Pragmatism: Since Stewart and Blocker provide us with a short and to-the-point “warm-up” on p. 245, let’s use it:

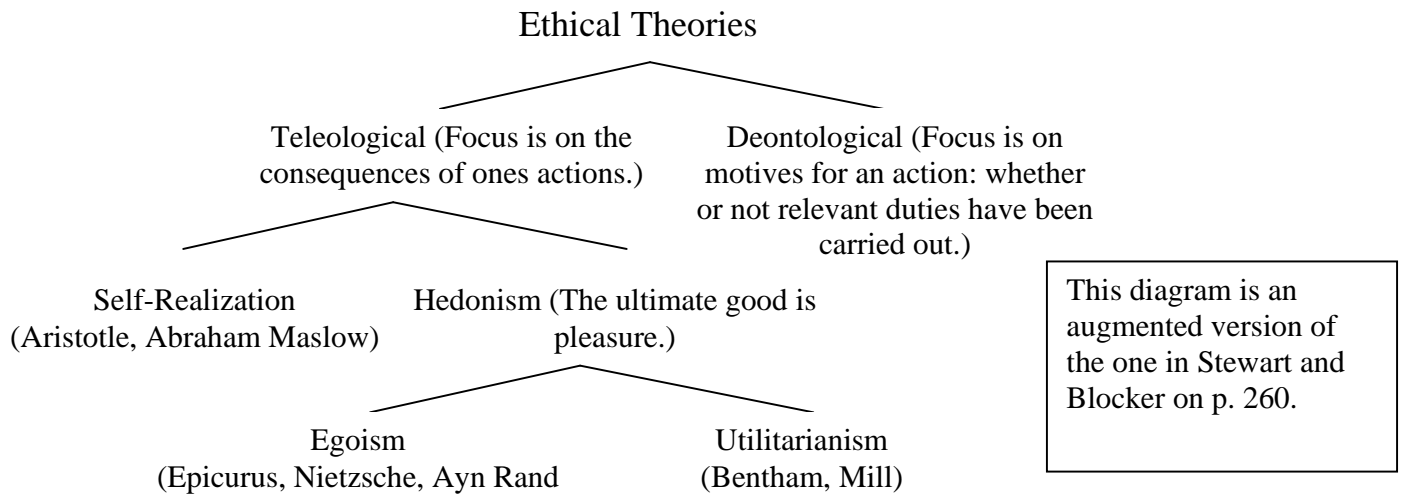
P. 245: Common to both empiricism and rationalism is the view that truth is a matter of theoretical knowledge; practical knowledge was not highly valued. This attitude is part of the Western philosophic tradition going back to the Greeks, who valued theory over practice. But around the turn of the century, a completely new approach made its appearance. Known as *pragmatism*, and seen as a distinctly American philosophy, this attitude toward knowledge saw knowledge and truth as fundamentally *practical* matters.

William James in his famous “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth” in his *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (William James, *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth*, intro. by A.J. Ayer, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1907/1975) writes:

P.97: *True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those we cannot.* That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as.

. . . The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of verifying itself, its *verification*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*.

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"Ethics: An Overview"



A few other concepts with which you should be acquainted:

Normative ethics: the branch of ethics which examines specific moral problems in order to discover principles that should govern human conduct and how we justify value judgments (adapted from S&B, p. 255).

Metaethics: See Stewart and Blocker:

Metaethics does not attempt to deal with specific ethical problems as such but with ethical discourse itself, with what we *mean* when we use ethical terms (such as right, wrong, good, bad, duty, obligation, and so on), and how ethical terms should be used. Metaethics has the same relation to ethical decision-making that the study of grammar has to the ability to speak a language. A person can speak a language without ever having studied its grammar, and a person can also make ethical decisions without ever having studied philosophical metaethics. But just as our ability to function in a language is often aided by a study of grammar so does an inquiry into metaethical concerns aid us in clarifying our ethical choices (quoted from p. 255).

Ethical Objectivism: The view that objective, universal standards of morality are possible (adapted from S&B p. 261).

Ethical Subjectivism: The view that standards of morality are relative to the likes and dislikes of the individual or society (adapted from S&B p. 261).

☞ Please observe that these four pages are intended only as an overview of basic concepts within metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. These three areas are often the areas into which philosophy is compartmentalized.

These pages are provided in order to help the philosophical neophyte to see broader contours both emerging within and connecting the various texts which have been assigned as reading in the syllabus for this course. For those who already have studied some philosophy, these pages may provide a somewhat synoptic view which will help to organize what you have learned in your studies thus far.

One thing is sure: any attempts at summarizing and relating philosophical concepts require compromises, where nuance is sacrificed for the sake of sweeping perspective. It is therefore **highly recommended** that all course participants continue to cultivate the interest in philosophy that watching television has inspired by taking a variety of courses offered by the Philosophy section of the Institute of Philosophy, Education and the Study of Religions here at the University of Southern Denmark!