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15-12-2017

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**Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)**

Rescher, N. (2017). *Metaphysical Perspectives* (Version 1). University of Notre Dame.  
<https://doi.org/10.7274/24828201.v1>

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NICHOLAS RESCHER

METAPHYSICAL  
PERSPECTIVES

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**NICHOLAS RESCHER**

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*University of Notre Dame Press  
Notre Dame, Indiana*

University of Notre Dame Press  
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556  
undpress.nd.edu

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Published in the United States of America

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Rescher, Nicholas, author.

Title: Metaphysical perspectives / Nicholas Rescher.

Description: Notre Dame : University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. |

Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017030359 (print) | LCCN 2017034712 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780268102913 (pdf) | ISBN 9780268102920 (epub) |

ISBN 9780268102890 (hardcover : alk. paper) |

ISBN 0268102899 (hardcover : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Metaphysics.

Classification: LCC BD111 (ebook) | LCC BD111.R3195 2017 (print) |

DDC 110—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017030359>

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(Permanence of Paper).*

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*For Gereon Wolters  
in cordial friendship*





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# PREFACE

Metaphysics is the study of existence at the highest level of generality. Its concern is with the “big questions” regarding the world, ourselves, and our place within reality’s scheme of things. The salient task of the field is to elucidate the concepts and principles by whose means a clearer understanding of the ideas of existence and reality can be achieved. As such, metaphysics has been an established branch of philosophy since Aristotle’s initial systematization of the subject in the fourth century B.C. And down to the present day it continues to be a lively area of investigation and deliberation.

In line with this tradition, the present book deals with a range of key metaphysical issues. Metaphysics, after all, has three prime areas of concern: (1) the world as such and the architecture of nature at large, (2) ourselves as nature’s denizens and our potential for learning about it, and (3) the transcendent domain of possibility and value, which impels us to consider issues that reach above and beyond the resources of nature. The book makes a journey across this large and challenging domain, engaging issues ranging from world views to transcendental concerns. In the course of this journey it sets out an integrated view of the key philosophical problems, which is grounded in an idealistically value-oriented approach. It thus seeks to throw new light on philosophically central issues from a unified point of view.

Metaphysics is an “extra-ordinary” domain of inquiry; why, then, should at least some of us cultivate metaphysics and seek for a synoptic explanation of everything? After all, the explanatory process has to stop somewhere: we cannot go on giving explanations *ad infinitum*. So why not

just call it a day and give up on the quest for a reason why things are as they are? In the end, the answer is simply, “Man by nature seeks to know,” as Aristotle put it.

I am grateful to Estelle Burris for invaluable help in preparing this material for publication.

Nicholas Rescher  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
November 2016

# INTRODUCTION

## On The Mission of Philosophy

How should one conceive of philosophy as a human endeavor? What is the aim of the enterprise?

Many answers have been offered. But four of them are particularly prominent.

**PHILOSOPHY AS LITERATURE.** Philosophy is akin to *belles lettres*. It spreads out interesting ideas as possibilities for thoughtful deliberation in reading and conversation. Like the study of literature, its aim is intellectual stimulus, enlightenment, and cultural sophistication. Its work is an exploration of possibilities, and its study is a sort of tourism in the realm of ideas. Not this week Dordogne and next week Provence, but this week Plato and next week Nietzsche?

**PHILOSOPHY AS MEGA-SCIENCE.** Like science, philosophy is a venture in rational inquiry aimed at the determination of reality's facts. But where science seeks to understand the constituents and the processes that make up the natural and the social worlds, philosophy wants to explain how we humans fit into our place within the world as so characterized. It wants to explain the scope and the limits of our cognitive efforts and practical activities within the world as science describes it.

**PHILOSOPHY AS NORMATIVE ASSESSOR.** While most other cognitive inquiries depict the realm of what is, philosophizing is ultimately a venture in normativity and evaluative appreciation. Its prime concern is with questions of value, especially cognitive value (i.e., importance) and practical value (i.e., utility). And its prime task is axiological—to explore and expand the theory of rational appraisal.

PHILOSOPHY AS LIFE COACH. The definitive aim of philosophizing is a practical orientation. Its task is to provide reasonable guidance for the conduct of life. The motto of the collegiate  $\phi\beta\kappa$  Society gets it right: philosophy is the helmsman of life (*philosophia biou kybernētēs*). It seeks to instruct us about how to live “the good life.”

Most philosophers adopt one or another of these approaches as authoritative. And as they see it, their favored version is solely correct and proper—people pursuing a rival path “are just not doing (real) philosophy.”

But this exclusivist position is seriously flawed. For the best available option is a combination and amalgamation of all these alternatives. This should become clear when one considers the wide range of questions and objectives that need to be addressed:

- (1) What are the subjects of philosophical concern? What issues are on the agenda? What sorts of questions arise? And what are the alternative possibilities for resolving them?
- (2) Since philosophy is bound to address our place and position in the world, it cannot avoid attention to what science has to say about the world’s composition and *modus operandi* and how we come to find out about these matters.
- (3) Philosophy has both a theoretical and a practical dimension. Its task is not just to explain the world and our place in it, but to guide us in the management of our cognitive and practical affairs.
- (4) To provide guidance, philosophy has to be concerned with what is important and what is unimportant, with what is of value for us and what is not. Concerned with the nature of the good, it cannot avoid addressing normative issues in its endeavor to provide guidance about thought and action.

And in dealing with the answers to the concerns just listed, all of the variant approaches described above—philosophy as literature, as megascience, as normative assessor, and as life coach—have a role. No single, limited line of approach can prove adequate to the entire project.

Philosophers have tended to focus on just one of these approaches and to see the others as incidental or irrelevant. But the inappropriateness of such a view should be clear. Statesmanship affords an illuminating model for philosophy here: a statesman cannot—or should not—wear blinders in looking at the problems and methods of the field. His proper task encompasses many dimensions of public affairs. Different approaches are re-

quired to handle the problems of public health, education, criminal justice, public information, and so on. The situation with philosophy is much the same. Philosophy is a complex, many-sided area of intellectual endeavor, and it thereby allows for many sorts of treatment. One must not labor under the delusion that any one part of it is the whole.

As traditionally conceived, the task of philosophy, specifically metaphysics, is to grapple with “the big questions” concerning man, nature, and man’s role in reality’s scheme of things. Science, to be sure, addresses these matters as well, but whereas science describes *how* things work in this world, metaphysics speculates about *why* they work in that sort of way. Science connects the constituents of reality to one another; metaphysics connects reality to possibility. And unlike the strictly descriptively informative concerns of science, the concerns of metaphysics are also normatively evaluative.

The issues that figure prominently in the agenda of philosophy and its various branches are inherent in the defining aim of the enterprise—to provide us with rationally cogent guidance for the management of our lives. This puts certain key questions at the heart of the discipline, namely:

- How do things work in the world? (Metaphysics)
- What is our own position in the world’s scheme of things? (Philosophical Anthropology)
- How are we to find out things regarding both nature and ourselves? (Epistemology)
- How can we reason cogently about the facts at our disposal? (Logic)
- What is good for us: what goals and values are appropriate for beings situated as we are? (Axiology)
- What should we do: what ways of acting are appropriate for us? (Ethics)

And because the particular conditions and circumstances in which we find ourselves in the world differ almost endlessly in their particularity, it will be nearly impossible to find answers that gain universal acceptance and generalities that hold across the board. But nevertheless, the very rationality that defines our nature as beings in this world requires us to dedicate to these important issues our best efforts at resolution.

Accordingly, philosophy asks questions like these:

- Why is it that the world is constituted as is?
- Is nature’s law structure necessary or contingent?

- What is it that gives people duties and obligations over and above those specified by law and by social convention?
- What is it that people ought to try to do with their lives?
- What does it take over and above the biology of being a *human* (a member of *Homo sapiens*) to be a *person* (a normatively engaged rational being)?
- What sorts of relations do and should exist among persons as such and how should we treat one another in view of this?

Moreover, philosophy is also a reflexive enterprise, a project a part of whose mandate is self-characterization. And this includes asking whether philosophical questions of the aforementioned sort are objectively legitimate at all, and what sort of measures are available for endeavoring to answer them. Or are these issues purely subjective matters of more or less arbitrary individual inclination?

Philosophy, so conceived, thus addresses issues of profound human concern. Granted, no one can manage to master or indeed even begin to answer all of its questions adequately. But one should never take the stance that issues outside one's particular sphere of interest don't really matter. And if the task is too large—if mastery of the whole is impracticable—then one can at least strive for a rudimentary understanding of the range of component issues and a clear understanding of at least one part of it. The philosopher cannot afford to be either a hedgehog, who knows a small terrain well but is ignorant of the larger setting, nor yet a fox, who knows superficially a wide area but no one part of it as thoroughly as the hedgehog. Instead, philosophers worthy of the name must try to the best of their ability to be a bit of both.

### PHILOSOPHICAL ERROR

Insofar as we are benevolent and wish for people the best that life has to offer, we undoubtedly want them to have knowledge, virtue, and happiness; that is, we want them to be wise, good, and contented. And insofar as philosophy is “the guide to life,” its function is to foster the understanding needed for the sensible pursuit of these goals.

In this light, the first and most profound error of philosophizing is to see its subject matter in misguided terms, with purposes apart from those that constitute its definitive aims.



In particular, it would be inaccurate to think that philosophy aims at presenting the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. That testimonial oath would be going too far. But what one can say is that philosophy aims in this general direction—that it tries to present the main aspects of the truth, insofar as this is needful and practicable, and in doing so that it seeks to avoid any outright falsification. In the circumstances, such a diminution of aspirations is only right and proper.

Even so, no one ever said that the work of a philosopher is easy. On the route to philosophical understanding, there are virtually endless ways of getting off the track. This alone would explain why it is difficult to make a systematic inventory of philosophical mistakes. Still, it is clear that there will be three major categories of defects in philosophical exposition:

- Errors of Commission
- Errors of Omission
- Errors of Transmission

Given that the aim is to secure rational conviction, philosophical deliberations cannot afford such errors, which are obstacles that stand in the way. After all, philosophizing is (inter alia) a venture in cognitive inquiry, and all of these types of errors involve violations of rational cogency.

To be sure, the avoidance of error is not a be-all and end-all. The way to philosophical understanding does not lie in the avoidance of errors alone. This desideratum may be a necessary condition for good philosophizing, but it is certainly not sufficient. All the same, it is a key point of a larger picture, and it is worthwhile to take a closer look at what it involves.

## ERRORS OF COMMISSION

Of the innumerable flaws of commission that can blemish a philosophical exposition, some stand in the foreground:

- Inconsistency/Incoherence
- Implausibility/Stretching Credibility
- Probative Deficiency
- Oversimplification
- Overreaching
- Fallacy
- Trivial Pursuit: Misemphasis

Let us consider these more closely.

*Inconsistency/Incoherence.* Logical coherence is an indispensable requisite. One cannot appropriately say in one place that something affirms or entails *P* and in another place that it affirms or entails not-*P*. There would be no clearer sign of a failure to think seriously and sensibly about the issues.

*Implausibility/Stretching Credibility.* Philosophizing cannot stretch our credulity beyond reasonable limits. In particular, philosophical theories and speculations cannot or should not contradict our basic cognitive commitments. In particular, philosophy must not conflict with the basic facts that comprise our prephilosophical cognition, and accordingly it must not contravene logical fundamentals, scientific fact, everyday knowledge, and common sense.

Refutation by *reductio ad absurdum* holds good in philosophy as elsewhere. What is being contended must not entail absurd consequences—be it individually or in conjunction with well-established fact. A philosophy that denies craters on the moon or tea in China is not worth the paper it is printed on.

Philosophizing is (or should be) a serious business. A philosopher's views merit attention because of their constructive take on the issues, not because those views are bizarre, let alone outrageous. The motto *Credo quia absurdum* may have some merit for the theologian, but is improper for the philosopher.

*Probative Deficiency.* Inadequate substantiation is a crucial offense. The reason for philosophical discourse is to secure agreement. And one cannot expect to achieve this in the absence of substantiation for one's claims. One's contentions should be presented in an environment that renders them at least plausible and at best compelling. Often, of course, we must maintain conclusions that go beyond the securely known premises at our disposal. (We could not otherwise reason inductively.) But of course the extent to which such premise-transcending leaps of conjecture are appropriate is decidedly limited. The philosopher may not be able to demonstrate his contentions with mathematical cogency. But he should not forget them extensively and make claims that have no visible means of support. The philosopher should not overreach and presume too much from his audience in the sense of uncritically generous concessions.

*Oversimplification.* Basic principles of cognitive rationality must be honored in philosophy as elsewhere. One is the principle of rational economy: complications should pay their own way, as it were. They should not be introduced save when actually needed ("Occam's Razor").

*Overreaching.* An aspect of cognitive economy is that one should not take on more than one can afford—"to bite off more than one can chew," as the saying goes. One should extend the range of one's claims only insofar as one can provide adequate support for them. In philosophical as well as architectural construction, one should avoid erecting a structure that is greater in size and scope than its foundations can support.

*Fallacy.* Not only must substantive considerations used to support philosophical contentions be acceptable in themselves, but the line of reasoning that proceeds from them must not be fallacious. It must avoid such familiar pitfalls as circular reasoning, begging the question, infinite regression, and so on.

*Trivial Pursuit: Misemphasis* (allocation errors). Philosophizing must embody a sense of proportion: it should not devote elaborate attention to trivia and shortchange important issues. A failure to pay attention to significance leads to allocating one's deliberative efforts to matters out of proportion to their due. The legal precept *de minimis non curat lex* holds in spades with respect to philosophy. Becoming enmeshed in trivia is not a philosophical desideratum.

## ERRORS OF OMISSION

Three principal forms of errors of omission can hinder the efficacy of philosophical exposition.

*Under-substantiation.* Substantive matters should never simply be taken for granted in philosophy; and the generosity of one's audience should never be presupposed. Substantial claims should always be substantiated.

*Oversimplification.* The full complexity of the issues must be acknowledged and taken in stride. As Socrates was wont to stress, matters are seldom as simple as they appear at first glance. Philosophical exposition must take account of the exceptions to the seeming rules.

*Agenda Truncation.* The big philosophical issues about man's place in nature's scheme of things are all closely linked and interconnected. One cannot be adequately addressed without dealing with its ramifications with respect to others. (For example, one cannot adequately deal with the moral aspects of freedom of the will without addressing the metaphysical issue of what is involved in an agent's being "in control" of his actions.) In such matters, adequacy requires following through with the trail of connectivity.

## ERRORS OF TRANSMISSION

Philosophizing is a venture in communication. Ideas do not convey themselves; they must be explained and spelled out in ways that render them accessible to others both as regards their intelligibility and their acceptability. Specifically, this calls for avoiding the three principal forms of transmission errors:

*Lack of clarity.* Obviously one cannot expect people to accept what they do not understand. Mystery may be appropriate in matters of religion, but not in philosophy, where an inability or unwillingness to convey ideas in a meaningful and clear way is a grave failing.

*Lack of organization.* This is a failure to put first things first and to structure one's discussion so as to make it clear how the parts contribute to the whole.

*Presumption.* A philosopher has to reach his audience where it is. He cannot presume too much and cannot expect his audience to grant his position without due justification. Accordingly, he cannot maintain something that is uncertain on the basis of what is yet more so, or that which is obscure on the basis of something yet more so (*obscurum per obscurior*). In matters of persuasive exposition he must be a courteous client rather than a domineering dictator. Expository arrogance may gain him attention, but not conviction.

\* \* \*

Philosophical exposition should transmit its message in an intelligible, accessible, and, where possible, persuasive form. And the various modes of philosophical error are to be avoided not because of communal disapproval or because a self-appointed "thought police" somehow penalizes them, but because they are counterproductive and self-defeating. Given that it is a key aim of the philosophical enterprise to secure the audience's rational conviction, philosophical ideas have to be presented in a way that can effectively achieve this objective. And the various philosophical flaws and errors described above are just that—flaws and errors—because they impede the achievement of this aim: securing conviction regarding the fundamentals of human existence on the basis of cogent reasons.

## ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

### QUESTIONS

Among the fundamental questions of metaphysics is that of the nature of existence at the highest level of generality. This is traditionally characterized in Aristotle's phrase as the study of "being qua being"—of reality in general rather than specifically of this or that sort, whether animal or mineral or whatever. But another "ultimate question," posed by G. W. Leibniz, is: "Why is there anything at all?" Before that question can be addressed meaningfully, some clarification is essential.

To begin with, what sort of *thing* is to be at issue in this question? Are *numbers* to count as "things"? If so, then reasons of necessity—of abstract general principle—will do the job here. Or again, if *facts* (states of affairs) are to count as "things," then the answer is once more straightforward: there are such things because, although how they exist is controvertible, that they exist is not. And there is also—according to some thinkers—yet another necessary existent, namely, God. And so as long as such "things" as facts and numbers (not to mention deities) are allowed into the range of relevancy, the answer to the Leibnizian question is simply: "Because it has to be so and cannot possibly be otherwise."

However, this consideration is not really critical because the crucial question is not

Why is there something rather than nothing at all?

but rather

Why is there something *contingent*—something whose existence is not necessary?

And so the “things” that will concern us here are real things and not mere thought-things, figments of the speculative imagination to which the characterization “real” does not apply. At bottom, that initial question is intended to be: “Why is there a realm of contingent existence—a real world with concrete objects in it? Why are there actually spatiotemporal entities when there might possibly be none?”

### DISTRIBUTIVE EXPLANATION CANNOT DO THE JOB

Rational inquiry seeks to explain the phenomena—the condition of things with which experience confronts us. And any ultimate theory of explanation that can adequately account for contingent existence-at-large must be holistic: it must address the entirety of a collective whole, the world. To be sure, some theorists endorse what has come to be called the “Hume-Edwards thesis,” namely: *If the existence of every member of a set is explained, then the existence of the set is thereby explained.*<sup>1</sup> And they then propose resolving the Leibnizian question seriatim, by explaining the existence of every existent through a causal explanation of its origin.

However, the fallacy here is not too difficult to detect. Consider the following two claims:

- If the existence of every sentence of a paragraph is explained, the existence of that paragraph is thereby explained.
- If the existence of each note of a symphony is explained, the existence of that symphony is thereby explained.

Both of these claims are clearly false as they stand. On the other hand, contrast these two with the following cognate revisions:

- If the existence of every sentence of a paragraph *as a sentence of that particular paragraph* is explained, then the existence of that paragraph is thereby explained.

- If the existence of every note of a symphony *as a part of that particular composition* is explained, then the existence of that symphony is thereby explained.

Both these theses are indeed true—but only subject to that added qualification. After all, to explain the existence of the spouses in a marriage is not automatically to achieve an explanation of the marital couple, seeing that this would call not just for explaining these participants distributively but also for explaining their collectively coordinated co-presence in the relationship in question. And the case is just the same with the Hume-Edwards thesis.

The explanatory invocation of the Hume-Edwards thesis fails to heed certain critical *conceptual* distinctions that are readily brought to light by means of a bit of symbolic machinery. So let us adopt the following abbreviations:

- $p @ q$  for “ $p$  [is true and] provides an adequate explanatory account for  $q$ ,” where the variables  $p$  and  $q$  range over factual claims.
- $E!x$  for “ $x$  exists,” where the variable  $x$  ranges over existential possibilities. (In view of this we have it that  $(\forall x) \langle E!x \rangle$ .)

On this basis, it is clear that the idea that “Everything has an explanation” or “There is an explanation for everything” admits of two very different constructions:

*Distributive explanation:* “There is some case-specific explanation to account for each and any individual existent.”

$$(1) (\forall x)(E!x \supset (\exists p)(p @ E!x))$$

*Collective explanation:* “There is one single comprehensive explanation that accounts for all existents—the entire totality of them.”<sup>2</sup>

$$(2) (\exists p)(\forall x)((E!x \supset p @ E!x))$$

It is clear that very different questions are at issue and very different matters at stake with distributive and collective explanations. For distributive explanations explain the fact *that* every member of a certain set has the feature  $F$ ; collective explanations account for *why* it is that this is so. And explaining how it is that all members of the club are male—which could be so by fortuitous circumstances—does not accomplish the job of explaining

*why* this is so (e.g., because the bylaws require it). In posing different questions we must be prepared for the possibility of different answers.

So the Hume-Edwards thesis is of no real help in our explanatory quest. One has to look elsewhere.

### ULTIMATE EXPLANATION

There is yet another “ultimate why question.” It is not “*Why* does the universe exist” but rather “Why does the universe exist *as it is*: why is it that the nature of physical reality is as we find it to be?”

For better or for worse, this question cannot be answered on scientific principles. And there is a simple and decisive reason why this is so. Scientific explanations by their very constitution must make use of the laws of nature in their reasoning. But this strategy is simply unavailable in the present case. For those laws of nature required for scientific explanation are themselves a part—an essential and fundamental part—of the constitution of physical reality. And they are thereby a part of the problem and not instrumentalities available for its resolution.

The duly revised “ultimate why question” confronts us with a choice. Either we dismiss that question as being unavailable, inappropriate, and perhaps even “meaningless” (as logical positivists have always argued). Or we acknowledge that answering this question invites and indeed requires recourse to some sort of extraordinary explanation—one that transcends the cognitive resources of factual inquiry. And here the options become very limited. For here we enter into the region of teleology, where there are just two available alternatives.

On the one hand lies the *teleology of purpose*, which itself can in principle operate in two ways: either by the conscious purposiveness of an intelligent being (a creator deity) or by the unconscious finality of a natural impetus toward the creation of intelligent beings. On the other hand, a decidedly different approach envisions a *teleology of value*, which accounts for the nature of the world in axiological, value-involving terms as being for the best with respect to some (yet unspecified) mode of evaluative optimality.

Accordingly, five different approaches confront us with respect to that ultimate why question:



- dismissive positivism (à la the logical positivists of the 1930s)
- metaphysical inevitabilism (à la Spinoza)
- theological creationism (à la traditional scholasticism)
- anthropic evolutionism (à la anthropic theorists)
- evaluative optimalism (à la Leibniz)

Each option is available. And none is forced upon us by the inexorable necessity of reason itself. In the final analysis, “You pay your money, and you take your choice,” in line with your doctrinal views on the matter.

But is the outcome simply a matter of preference, personal taste, or inclination? By no means! Here, as elsewhere, *rational* choice must be based on the evidence—and thereby on the deliverances of experience.

So the question becomes: Given the sort of world that our body of available experience indicates this one to be, what sort of explanatory proceeding seems best? Here, however, the experience at issue will no longer be merely the observational experience of our (instrumentally augmented) human senses. Rather, in matters of the sort now at issue, it must be the cumulative evidence of the aggregate totality of one’s life experience.

So where does this leave us?

## THE NEED FOR ODDITY: ABANDONING CAUSALITY

The key point was made by Leibniz long ago:

The reasons for the world [must] therefore lie in something extramundane, different from the chain of states or series of things whose aggregate constitutes the world. . . . So [to account for the world’s being] there must exist something which is distinct from the plurality of beings, or from the world itself.<sup>3</sup>

In explaining the being and nature of concrete existence-as-a-whole, we cannot invoke some aspect of the being and nature of reality itself. To do so would be to beg the question—to make use of some part, feature, or aspect of the very thing that is to be explained. And of course this mode of explanation cannot function effectively in the present context. For any causal explanation carries us back to the starting point: the presupposition

of this or that existent. But the question at issue puts this very circumstance into doubt. One cannot coherently invoke the existence of *something* in trying to explain the existence of *anything* whatever. In explaining the internality of the whole of real existence, one must go outside this realm.

It would accordingly be absurd to ask for some sort of *causal* account of reality-as-a-whole. Causality, after all, is a world-internal process: its functions show how some world-integral things and conditions arise out of others. It is the sort of account we use to explain how acorns yield trees and how lion parents produce baby lions. Causality is a matter of intra-world agency and requires world-internal inputs to do its work. It is not the sort of resource that could possibly be called upon to account for the world itself and to explain the origin of the totality of existents.

In the end, one cannot adequately explain contingent existence-at-large by an appeal to the nature of existence itself. The nature of contingent existence must be explained not on the basis of existing things or substances, but rather on the operation of principles that function with respect to the manifold of possibility.

Its formulation at this level of synoptic generality marks the “why-this-world?” question as a decidedly nonstandard question. For a standard existence-explanation will proceed in causally putative terms. The reason that  $X$  exists would be that there exist other items  $Y_1, Y_2, \dots, Y_n$  that interact causally so as to engender  $X$ . In standard existence explanations, what exists emerges through the causally productive machinations of other existents. But this sort of thing clearly will not do in the present context.

The question of existence-in-general cannot be dealt with as one of the standard generative sort, which asks for the existence of one thing to be explained causally in terms of the existence and functioning of another. We cannot say, “Well there’s  $X$  in the world, and  $X$  explains the existence of things,” because this simply shifts the issue to  $X$ , which after all is itself an existent. If we want *global* explanations of the existence of things in the world, we are going to have difficulty in getting them from existential premises pertaining to what the world is like. Does this mean we cannot get them at all?

And so, with ultimate questions, eccentricity is unavoidable. For such holistic questions are altogether extraordinary. Usually when we ask about

things and their conditions we are after a developmental account—how they got to be so by a process of transformation from some earlier condition. This standard sort of issue-resolution is clearly impossible in the present case. The fact of it is that when we ask an extraordinary question, we must be prepared for an extraordinary answer.

## A TWOFOLD TURNING

To secure our explanatory basis for contingent existence at large, one has to redirect one's thought in two directions: from actuality to possibility and from fact to value. Let us consider how these reorientations are to work.

### *The Turn to Metaphysical Possibility*

To account for the being of contingent existence at large, one has to impose the burden of explanation on something that is itself entirely outside the realm of contingent existence and of existential fact. But where can one possibly look for explanatory resources if the realm of actuality, of "what there is," is not available? The answer is clear: we must look to the realm of possibility, of what *can possibly be*. For if reality is to have a basis, then *possibility* is the only available prospect. And to have any explanatory traction here, we must also invoke the concept of value—of what there ought to be. Thus, to resolve the problem of existence we must ultimately turn to a metaphysics of value.

To repeat the critical point, the domain of reality as a whole cannot be cogently explained by invoking some feature of its existential content. If there is to be an acceptable explanation, its probative basis must lie wholly outside this domain. It cannot be done within the realm of *things* or *substances* at all, but must step outside to proceed on the basis of some sort of *principle*.

To explain some actual condition of things without involving any other actual conditions of things is clearly a very tall order. And our room for maneuver is extremely limited. For if we cannot explain actualities at large in terms of actualities, we have little alternative but to explain them in terms of possibilities. What is thus called for here is a principle

of explanation that can effect a transit from possibility to actuality, and thereby violates the medieval precept *de posse ad esse non valet consequentia*.

*The Turn to Eliminative Value*

But now comes a problem. If an adequate explanation of contingent existence is achievable only in terms of reference to something lying outside the realm of necessity and also outside the realm of concrete existence and contingent fact, then where can the explanation possibly go?

The only conceivable answer is this: it must go entirely outside the realm of fact to that of value.

To achieve a synoptically ultimate explanation of the domain of contingent existence/reality, we thus have to shift to another domain of deliberation altogether—and move outside of the evidential *realm of what is* to the normative *realm of what ought to be*, that is, from actuality to value.

And to realize this transition we must shift from the sphere of production to that of elimination. We must effect a revolutionary shift in the orientation of thought from productivity to reducibility, from fact to value, and from actuality to possibility.

In the realm of reality, creativity functions *productively* by engendering a yet-to-be-realized state. By contrast, in the realm of possibility, creativity is *reductive*; it functions by eliminating the prospect of some of the yet-to-be-realized conditions of things.

Ordinarily our concern with creativity is with the causal processes within nature. The second (metaphysical rather than physical) mode of productivity sounds rather strange to our ears. Nevertheless, at the level of ultimate explanation it emerges prominently into the foreground. In the realm of the real, creativity is innovative and brings new things to be. But on the side of possibility there can be nothing new and genuinely innovative: here, such novelty as there is proceeds by a selective elimination.

To be sure, the creative process in the realm of reality is temporal and subject to physical causality, whereas in the realm of possibility it is atemporal and subject to metaphysical selectivity on the ground of evaluative factors. Possibility-based explanation must implement the idea that contingent reality is what it is because that is somehow for the best. It must, that is to say, explain existence in terms of value and take what might be called the axiological turn. Again, the key point here was made by Leibniz:

Even if the world is not necessary [absolutely or] metaphysically, in the sense that its contrary would imply a contradiction or logical absurdity, it is nonetheless necessary physically [or evaluatively], determined in such a way that its contrary would imply imperfection or moral absurdity. And thus as possibility is the principle of essence, so perfection or degree of essence is the principle of existence.<sup>4</sup>

Granted, this sort of thing may sound strange. But in asking for an explanation of contingent existence as a whole, one is posing a decidedly extraordinary question, and when one insists upon doing this, one must be ready for a decidedly extraordinary answer. The bizarre nature of the answer is not an objection to it but the acknowledgment of a *sine qua non* condition of adequacy.

And so, one must reckon with the situation that an ultimate account of reality as a whole has to proceed not in terms of causal production but in terms of possibility elimination based on evaluative considerations. Let us examine how this approach would work.

### THE CRUX: NOT CAUSAL PRODUCTION BUT POSSIBILITY ELIMINATION

The crux of the reasoning required here lies in the Sherlock Holmes principle: “When you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”<sup>5</sup> However, elimination in the realm of the possible cannot proceed *causally*: it has to proceed *normatively*. Those eliminated possibilities are ruled out because they are inherently unworthy—outranked and outflanked by other, superior alternatives. Inferior merit is existentially disqualifying. And this eliminative principle carries a crucial corollary: *Reality is optimific*. Accordingly, the answer to the question of what explains the elimination of the inferior alternatives lies in a metaphysical principle of optimality: *Given an exhaustive range of possible alternatives, it is the best of them that is actualized*.

But just why should it be that the best possibility is the actual one?

To begin with, this raises the preliminary question, “best” in what sense? What is to be the standard of merit here? Of course, “merit” here has to mean merit in terms of qualification for actual existence, and “best”

has to mean best qualified in terms of the strength of the rationale for this status. In epistemology, the truth lies preeminently on the side of the strongest reasons; in metaphysics, authenticity lies on the side of the optimal option, the option on whose side lie the best and strongest reasons. And the basis for this principle of optimality lies in the nature of the principle itself: it is for the best that matters should stand so. Yet why is it that reality should merit the demands of reason? In the final analysis it is because reason itself demands our thinking it so. What it demands of us is a rational account, and an account that does not give rationality the lead in these matters cannot qualify as fully rational in itself. Kant maintained that for us, “ought” implies “can”; the tradition of Western metaphysics since Plato commits us to the conviction that for reality, “ought” implies “will.” (The seemingly obvious objections to this idea are based on the world’s manifold imperfections and will be addressed in chapter 10.)

#### THE STANDARD OF METAPHYSICAL VALUE: THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF INTELLIGENCE

The pivotal idea that the explanation of reality pivots on value—that the best available possibility is what will be actualized—spins like a useless gear that fails to engage the machinery of explanation until the operative standard of evaluation is identified. Only then will this “axiogenesis” approach acquire any explanatory traction. And so the question becomes: What sort of considerations can serve as the determinant of existential fitness here? What renders one world-arrangement superior and existentially more qualified than another?

It is clear that one cannot just optimize, any more than one can just maximize or minimize. For one has to optimize *something*, some feature or aspect of things. But if this merit-indicating factor is to be self-validating and self-sustaining, then the most promising candidate would seem to be intelligence itself—that is to say, the overall status and standing of intelligent beings at large. Any rational being is bound to see the loss of reason as a supreme tragedy. For an intelligent being—a rational creature—intelligence itself must have a prime place on the scale of values. Accordingly, intelligence and rationality best qualify as the self-sufficient standard of value at issue. The position taken here is thus oriented toward opti-

mizing the conditions of existence for intelligent beings at large. It envisions a universe that provides for

- the randomness through which alone intelligent beings can emerge in the world through evolutionary processes based on chance-conditioned variation and selection.
- the chance-conditional novelty and innovation needed for an environment of sufficient complexity to engage the thought of intelligent beings.
- the order of regularity and lawfulness needed for a universe sufficiently orderly to allow complex creatures to develop and thrive.
- a lawful order in the *modus operandi* of nature that is sufficiently simple to be understood by imperfectly intelligent beings as a basis for grounding their decisions and actions in a complex world.

The arrangements of an intelligently contrived universe must, in short, manage things in a way that rational creatures would see as optimal from the vantage point of their own best interests. Such a world must realize a condition of optimalization under constraints—these constraints being a manifold of natural law favorable to the best interests of intelligent beings in the overall scheme of things.

But if reality is indeed optimal for the interests of intelligent beings, why is it not easier for them to understand the world's ways? Why should there be aspects of nature that perplex even an Einstein?

The answer is that it just is not in the best interest of intelligent beings that the world be very simple. Simplicity is not the only key aspect of merit. For one thing, the design of a world in which intelligent creatures arise by evolutionary processes requires a great deal of complexity. For another, an overly simple world would not provide the challenges needed for the interests and efforts of intelligent beings to evolve. The ultimate answer to the question of why an intelligence-congenial world will not be simple is that this would not be in the best interests of intelligent beings. Even as a good gardener must strike a proper balance between variegated complexity and harmonious order, so a world that is user-friendly for intelligent beings can be neither so simple as to be monotonous for them nor so complex and unharmonious as to baffle their appreciative apprehension. As Leibniz saw, the world has to be a duly harmonized mixture.

### EXPLAINING THE OPTIMALITY PRINCIPLE: SELF-EXPLANATION AS THE PIVOT

But what is it that accounts for that crucial principle of optimality? What sorts of considerations could possibly justify optimalism? Why should it be that what is for the best be actual? The answer here lies in the principle itself. It is literally self-explaining, given that realization of the optimality principle is itself the best alternative in accounting for the prevailing order of things.

Yet is this reasoning not rendered ineffective through circularity?

By no means! At this stage, circularity is not vicious but virtuous: it is not a flaw but an essential asset. For any *ultimate* explanation must be self-sustaining and rest on a principle that is self-validating. If the validity of the principle rested on something else—some deeper and different rationale of validation—then it would not be ultimate but would through this very circumstance be flawed.

And the optimality principle indeed has this feature of self-support, which is here not a vitiating circularity but an essential aspect of the problem—a decidedly virtuous circularity. After all, there is no decisive reason why that explanation has to be “deeper and different”—that is why the prospect of *self-explanation* has to be included at this fundamental level.<sup>6</sup> After all, we cannot go on putting the explanatory elephant on the back of the tortoise on the back of the alligator ad infinitum: as Aristotle already saw, the explanatory regress has to stop somewhere at the “final” theory—one that is literally “self-explanatory.” In the end, we must expect that any ultimate principle must explain itself and cannot, in the very nature of things, admit of an external explanation in terms of something altogether different. The impetus to realization inherent in authentic value lies in the very nature of value itself. A rational person would not favor the inferior alternative; and a rational reality cannot do so either. And what better candidate could there be than the optimality principle itself, with the result that the divisions between real possibilities and merely theoretical possibilities are as they are (i.e., value-based) because that itself is for the best?<sup>7</sup>

So what has to be at work here is a proto-ontological law to the effect that under certain conditions, various theoretical possibilities become



eliminated (i.e., are realization-ineligible) as real possibilities by virtue of their evaluative inferiority. And such a process will have to continue its operation in the possibilistic domain until at last only one privileged alternative remains. What we have here is a figurative struggle for the survival of the fittest, but now with matters being fought out not among competing actuals but among competing possibilities.

Such an axiogenetic approach enjoys the advantage of rational economy in that it proceeds uniformly. It provides a single rationale for both answers—namely, that “this is for the best.” It accordingly also enjoys the significant merit of providing for the rational economy of explanatory principles at the level of metaphysical fundamentals.

In addressing the question of why the principle of optimality obtains, we have maintained it to be self-sustaining, obtaining because that is for the best. Granted, such an axiogenetic account of the principle goes against the grain of much metaphysical thinking, which is to explain matters by concrete causes—by the productive efficacy of existing objects—rather than by abstract laws and principles. And this line of thought naturally invites a theological implementation by invoking God as the instituting agent for the principle of optimality. This not implausible option will be addressed in greater detail in this book. For present purposes, however, it suffices to note that this theological treatment of the principle of optimality, while indeed available, is not mandated. A self-operated metaphysical axiology is in theory an alternative.