CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A book of this size cannot be expected to explore all the issues which can be raised concerning metaphysics. There are, indeed, many issues which could claim the attention of the philosopher. Epistemically, for example, one may raise questions concerning criteria for the certainty with which we hold metaphysical views. How do I know with certainty that sentences such as, 'The universe is finite' or 'Minds are immaterial,' are true or false? With respect to semantics also, one may raise questions such as: Do sentences which express metaphysical views have meaning? Do terms used by metaphysicians to refer to so-called metaphysical entities have reference? For instance, is the sentence, 'The soul is a substance,' meaningful? And does the term 'God' have any reference? There are logical issues which arise and have to do with the relations among concepts used by metaphysicians. For example, one may ask whether the concept of person is equivalent to the concept of mind or rather to the concept of mind and the concept of body taken together. And there are also many axiological issues that could be explored. What value does metaphysics have? Does metaphysics have a practical application? And so on.

One issue of particular importance concerns what has been called the "ontological status of metaphysics." This issue should not be confused with that involved in the definition of metaphysics, insofar as the former involves what is often referred to as its "ontological characterization." By this is meant the identification of the broadest categories within which metaphysics fits. An example

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should help us see the difference between these two issues. Consider the case of bachelor. A bachelor is defined as an unmarried man. But this definition does not tell us the most general categories to which a bachelor belongs. Within an Aristotelian metaphysical framework, a bachelor turns out to be a substance, because that is the one general category, of those Aristotle adopts, into which bachelors fit. Moreover, Aristotle would conceive that substance to be composed of two principles, matter and form. Other philosophers, however, might think otherwise. For example, Descartes would think of a bachelor as a thinking substance of a certain sort and for Leibniz, it would be a monad. Indeed, some philosophers reject the notion of substance altogether and thus maintain that a bachelor is something other than a substance. Hume, for example, would classify a bachelor as a bundle of perceptions.

The categorization of metaphysics too has been of concern to pnilosophers and they have frequently differed as to what that categorization is. For example, some have held that metaphysics, like any other kind of scientific knowledge, is a feature (often referred to as a quality) of the mind.[1] Others have held that metaphysics is a set of propositions.[2] Others still have spoken of a set of sentences or texts,[3] and so on. But settling this matter is not the concern of this book, although some of the things I say in chapter 2 have implications for it. Rather than attempting to discuss the ontological status of metaphysics or to deal with all the logical, metaphysical, epistemological, semantic, and axiological issues that can be raised about it, I concentrate my efforts on one issue, the definition of metaphysics, although by finding a solution to it I also provide an answer to the question of whether metaphysics should be understood nominalistically, conceptualistically, or realistically.

Definitions come in a wide variety, but these can be divided into two broad groups: nominal and real.[4] A nominal definition consists of a sentence whose predicate specifies the necessary and sufficient conditions of the correct use of the subject of the sentence. Nominal defi-

1. Aristotle, *Categories*, 8b26, p. 23.

2. Ockham, "On the Notion of Knowledge or Science" (*Expositio super viii libros Physicorum*, Prologus), p. 11.

3. If propositions turn out to be sentences, and metaphysics is no more than a set of propositions, then metaphysics is a set of sentences. Quine holds the view that propositions are nothing but sentences in *The Roots of Reference*, p. 35.

4. See Robinson, *Definition*, p. 16; Suppes, *Introduction to Logic*, p. 152.

nitions are the province of semantics, for they concern the meaning of terms. A real definition also consists of a sentence, but the conditions its predicate specifies have to do with the kind of thing to which the subject of the sentence refers. Both, nominal and real definitions, are supposed to express essence.[5] In the first case, it is what some philosophers call "nominal essence," that is, the necessary and sufficient conditions of the correct use of terms; in the second case, it is what some philosophers call "real essence," that is, the necessary and sufficient conditions that make a thing the kind of thing it is.[6]

In ordinary language, nominal and real definitions are frequently expressed by the same sentence, which is nonetheless understood differently, depending on whether one understands it in nominal or real terms. Consider the sentence, 'A bachelor is an unmarried man.' On one hand, when this sentence is understood to express a nominal definition, it is taken to mean something like: The term 'bachelor' means unmarried man. In this case, the predicate of the sentence is understood to specify the conditions of the proper use of the term 'bachelor.' On the other hand, the sentence, 'A bachelor is an unmarried man,' can also be understood to express a real definition, that is, something like: To be a bachelor is to be an unmarried man. In this case, the predicate of the sentence is understood to specify the conditions that must be satisfied for something to be a bachelor. Nominal definitions have to do with conditions of language use; real definitions have to do with conditions of being.

Note that I take predicates to specify certain conditions which are claimed to be satisfied by the entities to which the subjects of the sentences of which they are predicates refer. Moreover, I regard subjects and predicates as linguistic entities. In the sentence, 'Ebony is black,' both the subject 'ebony' and the predicate 'black' are linguistic entities. Occasionally, however, for the sake of brevity, I adopt the widespread custom of speaking about predicates as if they were not linguistic entities and of saying that predicates are predicated of the entities to which the subjects of the sentences refer rather than of the terms that are used to refer to those entities. I particularly adopt this way of speaking when I discuss the views of authors who speak this way.

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5. Aristotle, *Topics*, 102a1, p. 191.
6. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, vol. IV, ch. 6, 4; vol. 2, p. 253. The term 'real definition,' however, is also used to refer to all sorts of other things. For a list of these, see Robinson, *Definition*, pp. 189–90.

Traditionally, metaphysics has been taken to deal with real rather than nominal definitions. Whether it does or not, of course, depends among other things on the nature of its object, that is, on whether metaphysics studies linguistic or nonlinguistic entities. This means that the issue cannot be determined until we have established the object of metaphysics. But this is not what is at stake here. My concern at this point is with the kind of definition metaphysics itself can have: Is it real or nominal?

Some might argue that it must be nominal, for real definitions apply only to natural kinds, such as human being and tree, and metaphysics is not a natural kind, but the product of human intention and design. It is possible to respond to this argument that metaphysics is indeed a natural kind. Although metaphysics originates as a result of human intentional activity, it is not the result of human design. In this sense, it is very much like running, for example, which is a human activity originating from a decision to run, but it is not the result of human design.

This response relies on a distinction between natural and artifactual in which something artifactual is conceived as having been produced by human beings. But this conception of artifactual is too narrow. In a broader, more effective conception of artifactual, an artifact would be either (1) something which is the product of intentional activity and design, or (2) something which is not the product of intentional activity and design but has undergone some change or its context has undergone some change, and the change in either case is the product of intentional activity and design.[7] If we accept this view, then running is artifactual, for the way one runs is always the product of a process of learning, imitation, and thus of design. And the same applies to metaphysics, for even if there were some natural core to what we call "metaphysics," it is surely modified in many ways as a result of intentional activity and design.

In short, metaphysics is artifactual rather than natural. But can it, in this case, have a real definition? This brings me to an alternative answer to the argument that the definition of metaphysics must be nominal: That metaphysics is not a natural kind does not preclude it from having a real definition, for the distinction between real and nominal definitions is not based on the fact that the first applies only

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7. Gracia, *A Theory of Textuality*, ch. 2, p. 48. For this understanding of artifact to be effective, the notion of design must be, of course, understood to refer to the fact that humans have determined the necessary and sufficient conditions of the kind to which the artifact belongs.

to natural kinds and the second only to artifactual ones. The distinction is based on whether the necessary and sufficient conditions specified in the definition are conditions that apply to a kind or are conditions that apply merely to the correct use of a linguistic term. Hence, there can be real definitions of artifactual kinds as well as of natural kinds as long as the conditions apply to the kind and not to the effective use of a linguistic term. It is irrelevant whether or not the kind is the result, at least in part, of human intention and design, as long as the conditions apply to the kind. Chair can have a real definition even though it is an artifactual kind, as long as the conditions specified in its definition refer to the kind and not to the proper or effective use of the term 'chair.' And the same applies to metaphysics.

One may want to argue, indeed, that the real definition of artifactual kinds is in fact easier than the definition of natural kinds, for the conditions of a kind of artifact are established by those who design it. In this sense, the definition of a coat hanger is rather easy to determine, insofar as it was a human being who first thought and designed a coat hanger. In contrast, the definition of a tiger is difficult, for tigers are not the products of human design.

Obviously, if as some philosophers hold, it is impossible to reach definitions of any sort, whether real or nominal, then it would seem that we have no business trying to do so. But this is a position which is not to be accepted uncritically by any means. The position is the result to a great extent of a recent philosophical tradition which goes back to Wittgenstein. The objections raised against definitions run along two lines. One goes back to Wittgenstein himself and his view that it is not possible to identify common features to the things which are designated by common terms such as 'cat' and 'white.'[8] Wittgenstein illustrated his point with reference to the term 'game.' 'Game' is used to refer to all sorts of things, such as basketball, canasta, chess, and so on, but if one tries to identify some common feature to the things we call "games," we will find none. Games share no more than a family resemblance. Now, if this is so, then it is clear that a definition intended to establish necessary and sufficient conditions, whether of the use of a term or of the sort of thing to which the term refers, is fruitless.

I have discussed possible answers to this objection elsewhere, so I will not repeat them here.[9] For our present purposes, it should

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8. Bambrough, "Universals and Family Resemblances," pp. 207–22.

9. Gracia, *Individuality*, pp. 10–12.

suffice to say two things. First, if I can come up with an acceptable definition of metaphysics, that should be enough to answer this objection. But, even if I am not able to come up with a definition that is acceptable to everyone, still the effort to develop a definition should have proven useful in many ways, increasing our knowledge of the difficulties faced by the task of defining and of the reasons why certain definitions are unacceptable and why others appear more promising.

The second objection is based on the theories concerning the meaning and reference of common terms that Kripke and others have developed. According to this view, common names are very much like proper names, but proper names do not have a meaning which may be expressed through a description. We use proper names effectively because there is a causal chain which ties us to a moment when a baptism occurred. At that moment, the name was imposed on something, but the name still refers to that thing in spite of the fact that the thing in question may not be at all as it was when the name was imposed. In short, proper names are not descriptive in any sense. Now, so the argument goes, common names are also like that. That is why tigers do not need to have any common set of characteristics, just as games do not.[10] A tiger may turn out not to have stripes, for example.

The detailed answer to this objection, which I have also discussed elsewhere, need not detain us.[11] For our present purposes, we can use the same answer we gave to the first objection. If our enterprise is successful, it will show that this objection is ineffective. But, even if our enterprise is not completely successful, it would have helped us to understand in greater detail the problems involved in coming up with a definition of metaphysics and, presumably, will have deepened, even if only negatively, our understanding of the nature of the discipline or of our use of the term 'metaphysics.'

One thing must be added to this discussion of definition. The necessary and sufficient conditions specified in a definition, whether nominal or real, are usually specified in terms of genus and specific difference (*differentia*). The genus is the class to which the kind of thing which is to be defined immediately belongs. Thus, the genus of human being is often taken to be animal, and so is the genus of cat. The identification of a genus reveals a set of necessary conditions,

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10. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, p. 121.

11. Gracia, *Individuality*, pp. 12–13.

but to make the conditions sufficient, the specific difference must be added. This is the condition or set of conditions which distinguish the kind of thing being defined from other things which satisfy the generic conditions. In the case of human beings, the capacity to reason has been traditionally identified as the specific difference. Of course, the kind of condition that will function as a specific difference will vary depending on the kind of thing in question.

Neither generic nor specific conditions are sufficient conditions, considered separately and by themselves, for the determination of the *definiendum*. Considered by themselves, they are merely necessary conditions. Generic conditions are distinguished from specific ones in that the first are necessary for the second. In the example cited earlier, the conditions specified by animal are supposed to be necessary for rational. To be rational requires to be animal, but to be animal does not require to be rational.

The example I have provided to illustrate what is involved in a definition is not uncontroversial. Indeed, as explained, it turns out that all rational beings must be animals, and this is a view that some may not wish to accept. The reason: There does not seem to be any contradiction in the notion of a rational being which is not an animal. This difficulty, however, should not obscure the point about the relation between specific and generic conditions. For the difficulty in question concerns only the proper *differentia* of human beings, not the distinction between generic and specific conditions. Yet, even if that distinction itself is found to be wanting, this does not undermine what will be said in this book about the definition of metaphysics, for what will be said does not depend on the viability of the distinction. The use of genus and difference is convenient, however, not only as a device to understand the substantive position that will be developed in the rest of the book, but also as a way to tie that position to traditional discussions of the nature of metaphysics.

The definition of metaphysics, then, requires the determination of the genus to which metaphysics belongs and of the specific difference that sets it apart within the genus. Considering the long history of metaphysics, one would expect the task of defining metaphysics to be rather simple. In fact, however, this task encounters many difficulties.