What is metaphysics?

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There are, I believe, five main features that serve to distinguish traditional metaphysics from other forms of enquiry. These are: the aprioricity of its methods; the generality of its subject-matter; the transparency or 'non-opacity' of its concepts; its eidicity or concern with the nature of things; and its role as a foundation for what there is. In claiming that these are distinguishing features, I do not mean to suggest that no other forms of enquiry possess any of them. Rather, in metaphysics these features come together in a single package and it is the package as a whole rather than any of the individual features that serves to distinguish metaphysics from other forms of enquiry.

It is the aim of this chapter to give an account of these individual features and to explain how they might come together to form a single reasonably unified form of enquiry. I shall begin by giving a rough and ready description of the various features and then go into more detail about what they are and how they are related.

Metaphysics is concerned, first and foremost, with the nature of reality. But it is not by any means the only subject with this concern. Physics deals with the nature of physical reality, epistemology with the nature of knowledge, and aesthetics with the nature of beauty. How then is metaphysics to be distinguished from these other subjects?[1]

It is distinguished, in part, from physics and other branches of science by the a priori character of its methods. The claims of science rest on observation; the claims of metaphysics do not, except perhaps incidentally. Its findings issue from the study rather than from the laboratory.

Some philosophers have thought that the distinction between the a priori and the a posteriori is not absolute but one of degree. I am not of their view. But philosophers of this persuasion would presumably be happy to take metaphysics to be relatively a priori to the same degree, and perhaps in much the same way, as logic or pure mathematics. And with this qualification in place, a large part, though not all, of what I want to say will still go through.

Metaphysics is also distinguished from other branches of philosophy, not by the apriority of its methods but by the generality of its concerns. Other branches of philosophy deal with this or that aspect of reality – with justice and well-being, for example, or with feeling and thought. Metaphysics, on the other hand, deals with the most general traits of reality – with value, say, or mind.

The concepts of metaphysics are also distinguished by their transparency. Roughly speaking, a concept is transparent if there is no significant gap between the concept and what it is a concept of. Thus there *is* a significant gap between the concept *water* and the substance H_2O of which it is a concept but *no* significant gap between the concept *identity* and the identity relation of which it is a concept. The thought then is that the concepts of metaphysics are more akin to the concept of *identity* than that of *water*.

Metaphysics as so characterized might be a somewhat anemic discipline – there might be very little for it to do. But it has also been thought that metaphysics might play an important foundational role. It is not merely one form of enquiry among others but one that is capable of providing some kind of basis or underpinning for other forms of enquiry. In some sense that remains to be determined, claims from these other forms of enquiry have a basis in the claims of metaphysics.

Let us now discuss each of these features in turn.

1.1 FOUNDATIONAL AIMS OF METAPHYSICS

There are perhaps two principal ways in which metaphysics might serve as a foundation. One, which has received considerable attention of late, is as a foundation for the whole of reality. Some facts are more fundamental or 'real' than others; and metaphysics, on this conception, attempts to

characterize the most fundamental facts which are the 'ground' for the other facts or from which they somehow derive. It is important to appreciate that metaphysics, on this conception, will not be interested in stating the fundamental facts – the physical facts, say, on a physicalist view or the mental facts on an idealist view – but in stating that they are the fundamental facts. Its concern will be in the foundational relationships and not in the fundamental facts as such.

But important as this conception of metaphysics may be, there is, it seems to me, another conception that is even more central to our understanding of what metaphysics is and that would remain even if the other foundational project that is centred on the notion of ground were to be abandoned. Metaphysics, on this alternative conception, serves as a foundation, not for reality as such, but for the *nature* of reality. It provides us with the most basic account, not of things – of *how* they are – but of the nature of things – of *what* they are.[2]

In order to understand this conception better, we need to get clearer on the *relata*, on what is a foundation for what, and on the *relation*, in what way the one relatum is a foundation for the other. As a step towards answering the first question, let us distinguish between two different ways in which a statement might be said to concern the nature of reality. It might, on the one hand, be a statement like:

Water is H_2O,

which describes the nature of water but involves no reference, either explicit or implicit, to the nature of water; or it might be a statement like:

Water is by its nature H_2O,

which does involve a reference, either explicit or implicit, to the nature of water. Let us call a statement that is concerned with the nature of reality *eidictic*, from the Greek word *eidos* for form; and let us call statements of the former sort eidictic *as to status* and those of the latter sort eidictic *as to content*. We shall take a broad view of the latter – not only will they include such statements as that water is by its nature H_2O, but also such statements as that if water is H_2O then it is by its nature H_2O. As long as there is *some* reference to nature, the statement will count as eidictic as to content.

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[2] I have discussed the ground-theoretic approach to metaphysics in 'The Question of Realism' (Fine 2001) and the essentialist approach in 'Essence and Modality' (Fine 1994). There is an interesting question of their relationship which I shall not discuss.

What I have in mind by way of an answer to the first question, concerning the relata, is that metaphysics should attempt to provide a foundation *for* all truths eidictic as to content; and what then *provides* the foundation are the metaphysical truths that are eidictic as to content, along with the possible addition of other 'auxiliary' truths that are not eidictic as to content. Thus given the non-eidictic truths, the eidictic truths of metaphysics will provide a foundation for all other eidictic truths. Note that, in contrast to the previous foundational project, it is the fundamental facts themselves, rather than the foundational relationships, that are properly taken to belong to the province of metaphysics.

A minimal answer to the second question, concerning the relation, is that the metaphysical eidictic truths (along with the auxiliary non-eidictic truths) should provide a *logical* basis for the other eidictic truths; the latter should follow logically from the former. One might want to insist, of course, on something more than a logical basis; it might be required, for example, that the eidictic truths of metaphysics should provide some kind of explanation for the other eidictic truths. But the notion of explanation here is somewhat obscure; and my suspicion is that, for all practical purposes, it will be sufficient to insist upon a logical basis – that anyone who succeeds in finding a logical basis will also succeed in finding an explanation in so far as an explanation can be found. Thus again, in contrast to the previous case, there is no need, in making sense of the foundational enterprise, to appeal to a distinctive form of explanation or 'ground'.

Part of what has made the idea of an a priori foundation for eidictic truth seem so attractive is the thought that there should be a priori bridge principles connecting the non-eidictic facts to the eidictic truths. Consider, for example, the earlier claim that water is by its nature H_2O. This is an eidictic claim that does not belong to metaphysics, both because it is not a priori and because it is not sufficiently general. However, it might be taken to be a consequence of the following two claims:

Any substance with a given composition is by its nature of that composition;

Water is a substance whose composition is H_2O.

The first of these is a statement of metaphysics, while the second is non-eidictic (as to content). And it might be thought that, in a similar way, any eidictic truth could be 'factored out' into a purely metaphysical component, on the one hand, and a purely non-eidictic component, on the other.[3]

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[3] It has been supposed in the same way that all necessary truths might have their source in a priori necessary laws or that all moral truths might have their source in a priori moral principles.

Unfortunately, the above example is by no means typical and other cases are far less tractable. How, for example, are we to 'factor out' the claim that an electron by its nature has a negative charge? One might propose a factoring along the following lines:

Electrons have a negative charge;

If electrons have a negative charge then they have negative charge by their very nature,

where the first statement is non-eidictic (as to content) and the second is to be eidictic and a priori. However, it is far from clear that the second statement *is* a priori, for it is not true, in general, that something with a negative charge has a negative charge by its very nature and so why, in particular, should this be an a priori truth concerning electrons? Perhaps there is some ingenious argument that the claim is a priori in the case of electrons. But still, cases such as these make it far more difficult to see how factoring might always be achieved.

In the light of such difficulties, we might think of dividing our grand foundational aim into two more modest aims. The first is to provide a basis for the a posteriori eidictic truths (such as that water is by its nature H_2O) within the realm of the a priori. Thus ultimately the nature of things will be seen to have an a priori source (such as that water is by its nature H_2O if it is H_2O). The second is to provide a basis for all a priori eidictic truths within the realm of metaphysics. Thus ultimately the a priori nature of things will be seen to have a metaphysical source.

Consider, for example, the a priori eidictic claim that red and green are by their nature incompatible. This is not itself a claim of metaphysics, since it is lacking in the appropriate level of generality. But it may be derived from the following three claims:

(1) red and green are two distinct determinates of the determinable color
(2) distinct determinates of a determinable are incompatible
(3) if distinct determinates of a determinable are incompatible then they are by their very natures incompatible

The first two are plausibly taken to be a priori and non-eidictic (as to content), while the third is plausibly taken to be an eidictic principle of metaphysics. Thus it appears that the same kind of 'factoring' that was used to span the a posteriori/a priori divide can also be used, within the realm of the a priori, to span the metaphysical/non-metaphysical divide.

My suspicion is that the second of the two more modest aims might be somewhat easier to achieve and, if this is so and some a posteriori eidictic truths resist 'apriorification', then there is something to be said for focusing more attention on the a priori realm. But even here there may be difficulties. Consider, for example, the claim that it lies in the nature of any set to have the members that it does. This is presumably an a priori eidictic claim that, on account of its lack of generality, does not belong to metaphysics. But just as in the electron case, it is somewhat hard to see how it might be derived from the more general eidictic claims of metaphysics (though my own view is that it can be so derived).

1.2 SUBJECT-MATTER

Before considering the question of the subject-matter of metaphysics, let us make some general remarks on subject-matter. I feel that these remarks could be situated within an even more general study of the nature of different fields of enquiry and of how they are related to one another. But this is not an aspect of the question that I shall pursue.

Any field of enquiry deals with certain propositions, those that lie within its purview and whose truth it seeks to investigate.[4] Thus mathematics deals with mathematical propositions, logic with logical propositions, and so on. We might call the set of propositions with which a field of enquiry deals its *domain of enquiry* (to be distinguished, of course, from its *domain of quantification*).

Any proposition has a certain *subject-matter*. Thus the proposition that Socrates is a philosopher has as its subject-matter the man Socrates and the property of being a philosopher. We construe the subject-matter broadly so that the proposition that Socrates is not a philosopher might also be taken to have the operation of negation as part of its subject-matter, but we do not construe it so broadly that the proposition that every philosopher is wise also has each individual philosopher as part of its subject-matter, in addition to the property of being wise and the quantifier *every philosopher*. On a structural conception of propositions, we might take the subject-matter of a proposition to be constituted by the constituents from which it is formed, though it might also be possible to arrive at a conception of the subject-matter of propositions on a less refined conception of what they are.

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[4] My interest in what follows is in *pure* fields of enquiry, such as pure mathematics, and not in their application to other fields of enquiry.

We may distinguish between the elements of the subject-matter that occur predicatively within the proposition and those that occur objectually or non-predicatively. Elements of the first sort might be said to constitute the *ontology of* the proposition and elements of the second sort its *ideology*. Thus the property of being wise occurs predicatively in the proposition that Socrates is wise and so belongs to its ontology and the man Socrates occurs objectually in the proposition and so belongs to its ideology. A property may occur objectually in a proposition, as in the proposition that the property of being wise is a property, and it may even occur both objectually and predicatively, as in the proposition that the property of being a property is a property, and hence belong both to the ontology and the ideology of the proposition.[5]

Each field will have a certain subject-matter through the association with its domain of enquiry, the subject-matter of the field being the subject-matters of the propositions within its domain. Thus given that the propositions $2+2=4$ and $9>7$ are part of the domain of arithmetic, the numbers 2, 4, 7, and 9, the relations of identity and of being greater than, and the operation of addition will all be part of the subject-matter of arithmetic.

The subject-matter of a field will be ascertainable in this way from its domain of enquiry but, in general, the domain of enquiry will not be ascertainable from the subject-matter. If we put together different elements of the subject-matter of the field to form a proposition, we will not always get a proposition from its domain of enquiry. Identity and existential quantification, for example, are logical elements, they are part of the subject-matter of logic; but the proposition that there is something $(\exists x(x=x))$ is not a logical proposition, one whose truth-value it is the job of logic to ascertain.

The subject-matter of a field, as we have defined it, might be called the *broad* or *overall* subject-matter. But there is also a narrower notion of subject-matter that might be defined. For there appears to be a sense in which certain elements of subject-matter are *distinctive* to a field – a sense in which an element is distinctively mathematical, say, or distinctively metaphysical, or distinctively physical. Consider the metaphysical

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[5] The ontology/ideology distinction in this sense should be distinguished from Quine's distinction of the same name. For Quine, the ontology of physics will include elementary particles since these are included within its domain of quantification. But for me, they will not be included in the ontology since physics has no interest in any particular elementary particle. The distinction is analogous to Frege's distinction between 'saturated' and 'unsaturated' but is differently drawn.

proposition that two things are the same whenever they are parts of one another. Its constituents are *part*, *universality*, *conjunction*, and *identity*. But only the first is distinctively metaphysical. The rest are logical. Or consider the physical proposition that $E = mc^2$. Its constituents are *energy*, *mass*, *the speed of light*, *product*, *square*, and *identity*. But only the first three are distinctively physical. The next two are mathematical rather than physical and the last is logical.

An element of subject-matter distinctive to a given field somehow has its *home* in the field. It may appear in the propositions of other fields but only as the result of having been exported from its home; and, by the same token, other elements of subject-matter may appear in the propositions of the given field but only as the result of having been imported from their homes.

The overall subject-matter of a field will in general be broader than its distinctive subject-matter. Many elements will appear in the propositions of the field that are not distinctive to the field. What then is it for an element of subject-matter to be distinctive to a given field? From among all of the elements that may occur in its propositions, how do we tell which are distinctive?

It is tempting to answer this question along the following lines. One field of enquiry may *presuppose* or be *built upon* the subject-matter from other fields. In order to state the propositions of interest to the given field, we may need to make use of subject-matter from these other fields, even though strictly extraneous to the field itself.

The clearest case is with logic. There is hardly a field (with the possible exception of fields simply concerned with the tabulation of data) in which logical elements are not required in order to state its propositions. And other fields may have other presuppositions. As we have seen, mathematics is required to state the propositions of physics; geographical locales are required to state the propositions of history; and numerous naturalistic properties and relations are required to state the propositions of aesthetics and ethics.

Let us suppose that we can make sense of one field of enquiry presupposing another. Then we might say that the *distinctive* elements of a field are those that occur in its propositions but are not distinctive of any presupposed field of enquiry.[6] Thus logical elements will not be distinctive of

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[6] The hope is that this may serve as an inductive definition. Thus as long as the hierarchy of fields, as ordered by the relation of presupposition, is well-founded, the notion of distinctive subject-matter will be well-defined.

any field of enquiry but logic, given that any non-logical field presupposes logic or makes no use of logic; and if pure mathematics only presupposes logic, then the constituents of its propositions will either be logical or distinctively mathematical.

Under an ideal organization of theoretical enquiry, one might hope that each element of subject-matter had a single home and that each field of enquiry was home to some element of subject-matter. Different fields could then be distinguished by their subject-matter. But even without such an ideal organization, it is still plausible that many of the fields of enquiry of interest to us can properly be said to have their own subject-matter.

1.3 GENERALITY

When we survey the subject-matter of metaphysics, there appear to be elements of it that are distinctively metaphysical. The properties of *existence*, *material thing*, or *event* are examples of such elements, as are the relations of *part to whole* and of *determinate to determinable* or the notions of *nature* and *necessity*. It is, of course, possible for such elements to appear in non-metaphysical contexts. I can say that my car is missing a part or that I observed a surprising event. But still, the elements *part* and *event* appear to be distinctive of metaphysics in a way in which *car* and *surprise* or *and* and *some* are not.

These distinctively metaphysical elements have a striking characteristic in common. They all operate at a high level of generality. We do not talk of cats and dogs or of electrons and protons but of *material particulars*; and we do not talk of thunder and lightning or of wars and battles but of *events*.

But what is it for one element of subject-matter to be more general in this sense than another? The traditional view is that metaphysics deals with kinds or categories of the broadest possible sort; and the generality of a metaphysical kind will therefore lie in the breadth of its application. But whatever merit this idea might have in regard to kinds (and even here I have my doubts), it has little plausibility in regard to the other subject-matter of metaphysics. Any case of *part*, for example, is a case of *overlap*, though not vice versa, but *part* is not on this account less general in the relevant sense than *overlap*. Or, again, any case of *identity* is a case of *part*, though not vice versa, but *identity* is not on this account less general in the relevant sense than *part*.

Another suggestion is that generality is a matter of how broadly the element is *employed* in other fields of enquiry. This suggestion is related to the idea that logic is *topic-neutral*, since the topic-neutrality of logic can be taken to consist in the wide or universal presence of logical subject-matter within other fields of enquiry. However, the correctness of this account depends critically upon what one takes the other fields of enquiry to be; and it is hard to avoid the thought that, in so far as the account yields correct results, it is because it has already been taken to be definitive of the relevant fields of enquiry that they should contain the logical elements.

The relevant notion of generality has more to do, I believe, with descriptive content. The more general or 'abstract' an element of subject-matter, on this conception, the less its descriptive content. Thus what is determinative of the generality of an element is not the breadth of its application or employment but the extent to which it is sensitive to the descriptive character of the items to which it applies – with the more general elements being less sensitive to descriptive differences and the less general elements more sensitive. So, for example, the relation of identity will be highly general on this conception since its application to objects x and y is merely sensitive to whether they are one or two, while the relation of part to whole will be less general since its application will also be sensitive to the mereological relationships between the objects.

But what is descriptive character? And how might we measure the degree of descriptive content? We can make a start in understanding these notions by appealing to the concept of *invariance*. For simplicity, consider the special case of a relation in its application to actual objects and suppose that a, b, c, … is a list of objects to which the relation can meaningfully be said to apply. The relation will then induce a certain pattern of application on these objects – holding of a, b, say, but not b, a, of b, c and c, b, and so on. Let us now reorder the objects as a', b', c', … with a' taking the place of a, b' of b, c' of c, and so on. We may then ask whether the relation still induces the same pattern of application, holding now of a', b' but not b', a', of b', c' and c', b', and so on. If it does, then it is not sensitive to the difference in descriptive character between the objects a, b, c, … and the objects a', b', c', … and otherwise it is. So by going through all of the different re-orderings or permutations of the objects a, b, c, … , we can obtain a measure of the degree to which the relation is sensitive to descriptive character.

But such an account will only take us so far. It will not deliver the result that *event* or *universal*, for example, are more general than *dog* since,

from a purely formal point of view, permutations that preserve *eventhood* or *universality* are no less sensitive to descriptive character than those that preserve *doghood*. Still, we have a strong sense that they *are* less sensitive to descriptive character.

There are, of course, hard cases. Are *dog* and *cat* equally general? Or is one more general? Or is perhaps neither one as general as the other? However, such cases may not be involved in delimiting the subject-matter of metaphysics. For since *dog* and *cat* are each less general than *animal*, we may decide that the generality of metaphysics requires that it contain *animal* in preference to either *dog* or *cat*. In this way, a partial handle on the comparative generality of different elements may give us something close to a complete handle on the subject-matter of metaphysics.

But a question remains. For where exactly within the scale of generality is the distinctive subject-matter of metaphysics to be located? We cannot say that its elements are the most general of all (with invariance under all permutations) since that distinction properly belongs to logic. But it is not implausible that the elements of metaphysics should be *next* in generality to those of logic – the only elements more general than them being either metaphysical or logical. Logical and metaphysical elements will be neighbours, so to speak, with the logical elements lying on the 'formal' side of the divide and the metaphysical elements on the 'material' side.

It is also not implausible that any element that is neither logical nor metaphysical will be less general than some metaphysical element. Thus the elements of metaphysics, on this picture, will provide a buffer between the logical elements, on the one hand, and all of the remaining elements, on the other hand, the *only* neighbours to the logical elements being the metaphysical elements.

This picture still leaves open how far *down* within the space of subject-matters the metaphysical elements will extend. How specific can such an element be and yet still be sufficiently general to have its 'home' in metaphysics? The most straightforward answer is that the elements of metaphysics are those of *penultimate* generality, next in generality to the logical elements. Thus anything more general than a metaphysical element will be logical and anything less general will be neither metaphysical nor logical. If we were to think of logic as relating to the structure of thought and of metaphysics as relating to the structure of reality, then logic would provide us with the most general traits of thought and metaphysics with the most general traits of reality.

This gives us a pretty picture – with logic at the top, metaphysics immediately below it and everything else below them. Some may think that it too pretty to be true. One problem, which we have already mentioned, is that, even if there is a sufficiently clear notion of comparative generality to enable us to make sense of the idea of an element at an *ultimate* level of generality, it may not be sufficiently clear to enable us to make sense of the idea of an element at a *penultimate* level. It might also be thought that, even if there is well-defined idea of penultimate generality, there is no reason to think that there always will be elements at this level intervening between the elements of ultimate generality and the others.

I am not sure how seriously to take either of these misgivings, for the idea of an element at a penultimate level of generality appears to be tolerably well-defined and nor is it clear that there are any actual cases in which elements at this level of generality will not exist. In any case, to the extent that we can make sense of some traits of reality being more general than others, we can get some grip on the idea that metaphysics should aim *towards* generality, even if this aim can never be fully realized.

1.4 EIDICITY

Let us return to the topic of eidicity and consider more closely the way in which metaphysics might be concerned with the *nature* of reality, with how things are by their very nature. As already mentioned, metaphysics is not by any means the only field of enquiry with this concern. Thus logic is concerned with the nature of logical form, physics with the nature of the physical universe, and the various branches of philosophy with the nature of this or that aspect of reality. We might call fields of enquiry of this sort *eidictic*; and we should consider how metaphysics is like other eidictic fields of enquiry and how it is different.

We might, as a first step, take a field of enquiry to be *eidictic* if its truths are all and only those propositions true in virtue of its subject-matter.[7] Thus the truths of an eidictic field, on this conception, will flow from the very nature of the items with which it deals – the truths of logic from the nature of the logical elements, the truths of mathematics from the nature of the mathematical elements, and so on; and it is the combination of the particular subject-matter and the requirement of eidicity that will serve to characterize the propositions of the given field.

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[7] If the domain of enquiry is not closed under negation, then we should add that its falsehoods are all and only those propositions that are false in virtue of its subject-matter.

But what is meant here by the subject-matter? Is it the *overall* subject-matter or the *distinctive* subject-matter? Neither answer seems to give the correct results. Take the overall subject-matter first. The logical elements of identity and universal quantification are part of the overall subject-matter of mathematics and the Law of Identity ($\forall$x(x = x)) is true in virtue of the nature of these elements; and yet the Law is a proposition of logic rather than of mathematics. Take now distinctive subject-matter. That 2 + 2 = 4 is a true proposition of mathematics and yet not true in virtue of its distinctively mathematical subject-matter (since the nature of the relation of identity is also involved).

A more refined account is required. What I would like to suggest is that the truths of an eidictic field should be taken to be those that are *distinctively* true in virtue of its overall subject-matter, i.e. they are those that are true in virtue of its overall subject-matter but not true in virtue of its *non*-distinctive subject-matter, that part of its overall subject-matter that is not distinctive to the field. This then has the desired results. The Law of Identity ($\forall$x(x = x)), for example, is not a truth of mathematics since it is true in virtue of its non-distinctive subject-matter and that 2 + 2 = 4 is a truth of mathematics since it is true in virtue of its broadly mathematical subject-matter but not in virtue of purely logical subject-matter.

We might state the definition in terms of the different species of necessity. With each eidictic field of enquiry E might be associated a species of necessity, where E-necessity is a matter of being true in virtue of the nature of the (overall) subject-matter of E. Take now a field of enquiry E and let E$'$ be the union of the fields of enquiry E$_1$, E$_2$, … presupposed by E. Then under plausible assumptions, the truths of E will be the E-necessities that are not also E$'$-necessities; they are, that is to say, the *distinctive* necessities of the field. Thus the truths of metaphysics will be the distinctively metaphysical necessities, the metaphysical necessities that are not also logical necessities; and similarly for mathematics and physics and the like.[8]

It is important to observe that the present definition only requires that a proposition should be true in virtue of the nature of the subject-matter of the field to which it belongs, not that it should be true in virtue of its very own subject-matter. In certain cases, this distinction can be important. Consider again the proposition that there is something ($\exists$x(x = x)). This is not true in virtue of the nature of its own subject-matter since there is nothing in the nature of existential quantification or the relation

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[8] Metaphysical necessity in this subject-oriented sense is to be distinguished from the usual notion of metaphysical necessity, which is indifferent as to source.

of identity which demands that there be something.[9] However, it is true in virtue of the nature of the subject-matter of mathematics, since it follows from the nature of the number 0 that it exists. Thus this proposition is correctly classified by our definition as a truth of mathematics rather than of logic, despite the fact that it has a purely logical formulation.

We have seen that metaphysics is distinguished from other eidictic fields partly by the apriority of its methods and partly by the generality of its subject-matter. But there appears to be another significant distinction, perhaps arising from the latter. For the notion of eidicity, of being true in virtue of the nature of certain elements, is itself part of the subject-matter of metaphysics. Thus the propositions with which metaphysics deals will include not only propositions eidictic in status but also propositions eidictic in content. Indeed, any metaphysical truth T that is eidictic as to status will follow from a metaphysical truth T^+ that is eidictic as to content. For if T is a metaphysical truth, it will be true in virtue of the nature of various general 'traits' of reality (including perhaps some logical traits). Let T^+ be the proposition that T is true in virtue of the nature of those traits. Then T^+ will also be true in virtue of the nature of general traits of reality (viz., those by means of which T is true plus perhaps the eidicity trait); and so T^+ will also be a truth of metaphysics.

Given that this is so, we may confine our attention to simple eidictic truths of the form 'it is true in virtue of such and such traits that so and so'. For instead of asking 'is S the case?', for some suitable metaphysical sentence S, we may ask 'is S the case in virtue of the nature of the general traits of reality?' Put somewhat grandiosely, we might say that '$\Box_F S$' for suitable F is the general form of a metaphysical claim and that the task of metaphysics will have been completed once we have a complete inventory of the F (the general traits of reality) and of the truths of the form $\Box_F S$ (to the effect that S is true in virtue of the nature of the F).

It is not altogether clear to me whether, or to what extent, other eidictic fields have an interest in truths eidictic as to content in addition to truths eidictic as to status. Take logic. It is concerned to state the logical truths, those true in virtue of the nature of the logical elements. But logic is not also concerned to state that these truths *are* the logical truths. Similarly in the case of mathematics. We want to get at the mathematical truths, but not at their being the mathematical truths. The various different branches

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[9] It is here important to distinguish between ideology and ontology. We may say (treating *identity* objectually) that it lies in its nature to exist but not (treating *identity* and *existential quantification* predicatively) that it lies in their nature that something should exist.

of philosophy, such as epistemology or ethics, seem to have an explicit
interest in the *nature* of certain items – such as knowledge or obligation.
But even here the interest seems incidental to the interest in the 'low-level'
eidictic truths (in knowledge being true justified belief, say, rather than in
its being by its nature true justified belief); and if the foundational aims
of metaphysics can indeed be achieved, then separate consideration of the
corresponding 'high-level' eidictic truths will not in fact be required.

1.5 TRANSPARENCY AND APRIORICITY

Our concern so far has been with the propositions and subject-matter of an
eidictic field. But what of its sentences and terms? What kind of sentences
or terms can be used in logic, say, or in mathematics or metaphysics?

One might think that the answer to this question was obvious. A
sentence will be mathematical, say, iff it expresses a mathematical prop-
osition and a term will be mathematical iff it signifies a mathematical
item. However, this view can hardly be sustained. For suppose we use
the description 'the number of planets' to fix the reference of the term
'nop'. Then the sentences '9 > 7' and 'nop > 7' will express the very same
proposition and yet the first is clearly mathematical while the second
clearly not.

This is a somewhat artificial case and depends upon doctrines within
the philosophy of language which not everyone will accept. But there are
also more natural and less contentious cases. The term 'the number of
sides of a triangle,' for example, signifies the number 3 and yet is not a
suitable term of arithmetic and 'here' signifies a locale and yet is not a
suitable term of geography. Thus it appears that a field of enquiry comes
with a built-in restriction not only on its propositions but also on how
those propositions may properly be expressed.

But what are these further restrictions? Let us not attempt to answer
this question in full generality (even if this were possible) but only in
relation to an a priori eidictic field, such as metaphysics or logic. If we
wish a field to be a priori, then we should so choose its vocabulary that it
provides us with a priori access to its truths. Let us be a little more pre-
cise. Suppose that the subject-matter of the field is given by the elements
$t_1, t_2, \ldots$; and let $\mathrm{t_1, t_2, \ldots}$ be corresponding terms for $t_1, t_2, \ldots$ Then we
want every sentence 'S' formulated by means of the terms $\mathrm{t_1, t_2, \ldots}$ to be
such that:

(*) if 'S' expresses a necessary truth then it is a priori that S.

We may also want that every one of the sentences 'S' be such that:

(**) it is a priori that if S then it is a priori that S.[10]

We might say that a vocabulary constituted by the terms t_1, t_2, … is *epistemically transparent* if case (*) is satisfied and that it is *strongly epistemically transparent* if (**) is also satisfied. It is then a natural requirement on an a priori eidictic field that it should have an epistemically – or strongly epistemically – transparent vocabulary.

The transparency requirement might also be formulated in terms of concepts.[11] Roughly speaking, the concept signified by a term is what we grasp in understanding the term; and our intention is that terms signifying the same concept should not differ in their epistemic status – that claims about what we can know should be indifferent to the use of one such term as opposed to another. Let τ_1, τ_2, … be concepts for the elements t_1, t_2, … Then we want every statement Σ formulated by means of the concepts τ_1, τ_2, … to be such that:

(*)′ if the statement Σ signifies a necessary truth then it is a priori that Σ.

And similarly for the analogue of (**).

Epistemic transparency, whether for terms or for concepts, is both a global and an epistemic phenomenon. But it might be thought to have a basis in the local and modal features of the individual concepts and terms themselves. Consider Kripke's famous example of water being H_2O. This statement signifies a necessary truth and yet is a posteriori. Why? It might be thought that this is because of the character of the concept of water (and perhaps also of H_2O). For what the concept is a concept of is hostage to the empirical facts. In this world it is a concept of H_2O but in another world, in which XYZ falls from the sky and fills the oceans etc., it will be a concept of XYZ.

Say that a concept of *x* is *modally transparent* if it is necessarily a concept of *x* and that otherwise it is *modally opaque*. Thus the concept of identity will be modally transparent since it is necessarily a concept of identity while the concept of water will not be modally transparent since it will not necessarily be a concept of water (i.e. of H_2O). The thought then is that the modal transparency of individual concepts will be sufficient to guarantee their epistemic transparency and that it is only because

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[10] We may want to weaken the requirement that S be a priori to the requirement that it be a priori *if knowable.*

[11] There are difficulties in taking each term to correspond to a concept which I hope, for the purposes of the present discussion, may be ignored.

of the presence of a modally opaque concept (such as *water* in *water is H₂O*) that a necessary truth might fail to be a priori.[12]

An alternative, eidictic, notion of transparency might be defined. Given a concept τ of *x* and a field F, let us say that τ is *strictly transparent in* F if it lies in the nature of the subject-matter of the field F that τ is a concept of *x*.[13] Any strictly transparent concept will, of course, be modally transparent; if the concept τ is a concept of *x* by the nature of some sub-ject-matter then the concept will necessarily be a concept of *x*. So strict transparency will also be sufficient for epistemic transparency given the sufficiency of modal transparency.

However, the converse connection need not hold; a concept may be modally transparent without being strictly transparent. For consider our previous example of the concept of the number of sides of a triangle. It is necessarily a concept of 3 but it might be argued that it is not by its nature and the nature of the subject-matter of arithmetic a concept of 3; some-thing about the nature of *triangle* and *side* is also required. Given that the truths of an eidictic field turn on the nature of its subject-matter, it seems to be especially appropriate that the objects picked out by its concepts should also turn on the nature of its subject-matter; and so, by using the strict criterion in place of the modal criterion, we may get a better grip on what the concepts of various eidictic fields should be.

1.6 THE POSSIBILITY OF METAPHYSICS

We have characterized the traditional conception of metaphysics in terms of a range of desirable features. Metaphysics should be concerned with the nature of reality; it should operate at a high level of generality; its method of enquiry should be a priori and its means of expression transparent; and it should be capable of providing a foundation for all other enquiry into the nature of reality.

But can all of these desiderata be captured within a single field of enquiry? Might there not be a conflict between the demand to know the nature of reality, for example, and the desire for a prioricity? Or between

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[12] Under the 'two-dimensional' semantics – favoured by Chalmers (1996), Jackson (1998) and oth-ers – a term will be transparent in this sense if its intension remains the same under any variation in the 'world' or 'scenario' considered as actual. The notion of semantic stability in Bealer (1999) plays a somewhat similar role, as does the homonymous distinction of Foster (1982: 62–3).

[13] A related notion is that of a concept which by its very nature signifies what it does. The concept contains within itself, so to speak, what it is a concept of. In so far as we can be expected to have a priori knowledge of the nature of a concept we can also be expected to have a priori knowledge of the nature of its object for concepts of this sort.

the demand for generality and the desire to achieve the foundational aims? And should the traditional conception of metaphysics as a unified field of enquiry perhaps be abandoned in favour of a multitude of different fields of enquiry, each emphasizing this or that aspect of the traditional conception?

The answer to this question is by no means clear, but there is at least some reason to think that these various desiderata *can* all be captured within a single field of enquiry. For suppose we start off with the desire to find an explanation for eidictic truth. Then, as a rule, we can expect there to be an elevation in the generality of the subject-matter as we move from a given eidictic truth to its explanans. The example concerning water is typical in this regard, since *substance* is more general than *water* and *composition* more general than the molecular form of composition involved in H_2O; and so one might hope that, in the limits of eidictic explanation, the elements of subject-matter will be of a high, and perhaps even of a penultimate, degree of generality.

Once we have achieved the desired level of generality, it is not so hard to see how we might secure modal (or eidictic) transparency. For, as a rule, the more general an element of subject-matter – the more 'cut off' it is from the world – the easier it is to secure transparent reference. Thus it is that we have the sense of greater transparency as we move from *cat* to *animal*, say, or from *animal* to *living thing*; and so, again, one might hope that in the limits of eidictic explanation, the generality of the subject-matter of metaphysics will be sufficient, as it is in logic, to secure the transparency of its concepts.

Finally, with the combination of necessity (or eidicity) and transparency comes the possibility of a priori knowledge. One major obstacle to achieving a priori knowledge is removed; and perhaps no other obstacle stands in its way. Thus if all goes well, eidictic explanation will terminate in the general a priori truths of metaphysics.