Metaphysics // Fall 2016

Handout 1

Introduction: Three metaphysics; Cosmological arguments: Maimonides, Leibniz

Possibility of metaphysics. It is not clear whether the discipline we are going to examine this semester has anything to go for it. Metaphysics is supposed to address questions about existence, God, causation, properties, time, space, freedom. All of these are moreover to be addressed by reason and argument, not by experimentation or reliance on authority. Can this be done? Hofweber gives the examples of change and properties; let us give a couple more.

Example 1 (God). If the question is to be the existence of God, we should hope to establish it by reasoning. But there is a long tradition in philosophy, beginning at least with Hume and Kant, of seeing these arguments as unsuccessful. Modern versions of the teleological argument employ biological knowledge, and it is not clear how a philosopher can be best positioned to discuss these issues.

Example 2 (Time). One of the ancient metaphysical questions is the nature of time. But what is there left to debate if the nature of time has been addressed by physical theories.

Three reactions. Facing these doubts, a metaphysician can elect to follow two routes. One is to insist doing metaphysics the old way, ignore scientific findings, deem them irrelevant. This is *ambitious metaphysics*. (See Lowe's claims on change in Hofweber's selection.) Another is to surrender to sciences and restrict oneself to philosophical commentaries on scientific findings. In practice it can mean elucidating the assumptions made in particular areas of empirical reasearch, clarifying the logical structure of scientific arguments. Or it can mean in essence paraphrasing scientific results and showing how they resolve traditional philosophical problems. This is *unambitious metaphysics*.

Could there be a third route? If there is any such route, *modest metaphysics*, it has to answer methodological questions of the domain of metaphysica enquiry ('what are metaphysical questions about?') and of the epistemic tools the enquiry is conducted with ('what is the epistemic advantage of a metaphysian over a man on the street?').

Our course. We are not going to establish the viability of modest metaphysics directly. Our selections contain fragments from ambitious metaphysics (e.g., Leibniz, Lewis) and from unambitious metaphysics (in the later part of the course—e.g., Searle, Dupré). Yet most of them are *de facto* in the area of modest metaphysics. I say *de facto*, since hardly any of the authors draws the distinction explicitly or shows any interest in doing so. They are aware of the relevance of science and do not deny it. Many of them explicitly engage with the scientific research, and in some cases their philosophical discussion begins with the facts of that research (e.g., Steiner).

Cosmological argument: Maimonides In our selection Maimonides gives four proofs of the existence of God. Let us examine the third one. Begin with three mutually exclusive alternatives:

(i) Everything is eternal.
(ii) Everything is destructible.
(iii) Some things are eternal, some are destructible.

The first alternative is impossible: we regularly observe things being destroyed. The second one might seem attractive. Empirical evidence suggests everything we ever come across is destructible, and there is no obvious reason why every thing in general should not be so. Maimonides argues that there is such a reason. 'Everything is destructible' means that that for every x, x can be destroyed. But what is possible must at some time be actualized. Therefore, everything at some point in time is destroyed. At which point in time? At some *past* time. So the presently existent objects would not come into being (nothing can generate nothing). Thus a contradiction. And therefore, next to destructible objects there is an eternal entity.

Comments on the argument The argument does not appear to be cogent or compelling.

Eternity of the world. If the world is not eternal, that is, if time is finite, then at some point the world came into being. But in this case there is not much incentive to deny the existence of a creator. That is why Maimonides thinks that this premiss is unproblematic. Very well; but if we assume the eternity of the world, then one entity at least is *already* eternal—and this is precisely what we hoped to establish as a conclusion.

Plenitude. The principle of plenitude in Maimonides' version states that every genuine possibility must be actualised. More generally, it states that every genuine possibility should be marked off from impossibility, that there must be some element of reality making a genuine possibility *genuine*. Leibniz and David Lewis grappled with this same question and gave different answers. But to say that every genuine possibility should be actualized, at least if time is infinite, is bizarre. It is a possibility, if anything is, that I could have shaved yesterday, though actually I did not. It does not help if the world is infinite to make this possibility actual at any point in time: yesterday is gone, and I will never shave yesterday, if I haven't done it *then*. Perhaps, however, we should consider a timeless possibility. Instead of examining 'SB shaves on 22.09' we should examine the possibility 'SB shaves'. This is not good, because clearly this is a *different* possibility. Even so, it may be that I never shave in the course of my life. I die unshaven. What then? Are we supposed to think that, in the infinity of time, I will have to be resurrected many times over and compelled to shave in one of those resurrections?

Perhaps this is not as absurd as it sounds. Suppose the universe contains two particles. Then these particles can be arranged in all sorts of ways: AB, BA, $\overset{A}{B}$, $\underset{A}{B}$ etc. The claim may be that, as time goes on to infinity, all of these combinations will be realized. By analogy, suppose our world consists of many particles. So my not shaving yesterday corresponds to a combination C_1 of those particles, and shaving to C_2. The claim must be then that, while C_1 obtained

yesterday, C_2 will obtain at some distant point in the future if time is infinite. In simpler terms, in the infinity of time, there will be infinitely many versions of me undergoing all sorts of change—indeed, every possible change. This reasoning seems problematic: all we can say is that there will be qualitative duplicates of SB shaving in the future, perhaps in 23896728 years, but not that SB himself will be shaving then. For SB will be long dead by then.

Quite a different problem here is that we assumed a finite number of particles—in effect, a finite universe. But if the number of particles is infinite, then the number of their combinations may well—indeed, should—outrun the number of temporal instants, thus ensuring that not every possibility is realised in the infinity of time.

Eternity of matter. Observe that the argument begins with the premiss: we observe many things being destroyed. But there is an ambiguity here. Material things may be destroyed, but is the matter itself destroyed? An Aristotelian answer may be quite complex. The modern answer, however, should be that even if matter *can be* destroyed, that is not something you can easily observe. Suppose I burn this table. The table is destroyed, so is the wood, but the matter remains in a different form. Once you are aware of that, there should be more incentive to think of one enduring eternal entity, namely, the matter itself.

Cosmological argument: Leibniz. In Leibniz' version, the cosmological argument for the existence of God relies on the principle of sufficient reason. We observe that our world—a combination of actual things—exists. if the world's existence began at a certain time, then we ask what caused it to begin, what, for example, caused the first motion. That first cause, the prime mover, will be God. Suppose, however, we assume that the world has existed eternally. That is an assumption Leibniz is happy to make. Then the chain of causes will extend indefinitely into the past. But in this case we will ask why the world *exists*—that is, why anything exists, rather than nothing. Everything must have a reason. So this existence of *anything at all* must also have a reason.

Thus there must be some entity that endows the world (actual things) with existence. Suppose this entity, the creator, exists only contingently. Then we will ask again for the reason why the creator came into existence. We can have an infinite chain of questions and answers—an infinite chain of explanations, an infinite hierarchy of creators. But again, for any such hierarchy, it should be possible to ask why *it* exists, rather than nothing.

Leibniz argues that the only way of providing an explanation for the existence of the totality of the facts, or of the totality of contingent creators, is to postulate a *necessary* Creator. Such an entity would be self-explanatory, since existence would be built into its own concept.

An alternative way of framing the argument, though not in the text before us, would be to ask why this universe, or this creator, exist in the way it does. If, e.g., the fundamental law of our universe is $E = mc^2$, it would be nice to know why that law could not be different. If a finite creator made it so, we will ask for a reason why he chose exactly this formula. Everything about such a creator, including his choices, would require an explanation (a reason for that choice). While we can go on producing an infinite series of explanations for each particular fact, choice, or finite creator, we again can take all of that as a whole and ask why it has turned out this way, rather than another.

All of these choices could be explained if we allowed a perfectly rational ultimate choice itself requiring no further explanation.

Comments on the argument. Let us mention a few obvious difficulties.

Infinite hierarchy of reasons. Leibniz allows the infinity of time, the eternal existence of the world. But then it is unclear why one cannot similarly allow an infinite hierarchy of contingent creators. At every point in this hierarchy we should be able to ask a question why this universe (creator) exists, rather than nothing at all, only to move one step up in the hierarchy. Suppose I want to know why our physical universe exists, and I answer that a creator 'Jim' produced it in the laboratory. I can even think that other creators, Jim's colleagues, produce other universes. Of course I will then ask why Jim and *his* universe exist. To this I say that the creator of creators created them. The question is repeated again, and similar answers are given. The chain of universes and reasons, of the creation and the creator, never ends, but where is the problem with that? Why should it be more difficult to conceive of than the infinite existence of a single universe?

Reasons of necessity. Leibniz seems to think that necessary beings or necessary facts require no further reasons. It is simply unclear why that should be so. Suppose we endorse the conclusion that God created the collection of contingent beings. But why is there God rather than nothing? Is this a question so absurd as not to be asked? Suppose I think that '1 + 1 = 2' is a necessary fact. Id does *not* seem absurd to ask why this fact obtains. Learning that this is a necessary fact does not make my query superfluous.

Contingency eliminated. Suppose that God created this world through a perfectly rational choice. God is necessarily rational. Thus God necessarily chooses to create the world. And thus the world itself is a necessary entity.

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