

Metaphysics -- a brief critique

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An exploration of the history and current status of monism versus pluralism.

The word “metaphysics” was coined by Aristotle and means (literally) “after physics” or “what follows physics”. In other words, when the study of the physical world (that is, science) has been exhausted – what next? When science has said everything it can about physical reality, there is still an unexplained residue left over – and that’s what metaphysics thinks and argues about.

This becomes clearer if we take an example.

Metaphysics often takes a “big picture” look at reality, and comes up with a grand, over-arching theory of reality – such as: “monism” versus “pluralism”. Both are theories about how many substances exist. It is the classic question of “one or many”. There are two kinds of monism: (1) category monism, and (2) absolute monism.

(1) CATEGORY MONISM (also called “attributive monism”) says that there’s only one type (or category) of substance that exists. Some “category monists” will argue for “materialism” (the notion that everything in the universe can be reduced to matter and energy – that there is nothing that cannot be reduced to atoms in motion). Other “category monists” will argue for “idealism” (the notion that everything in the universe can be reduced to a non-material category or type such as “mind”; George Berkley [1685-1741], for example, argued that existence consists of either (a) being a perceiving mind, or (b) being perceived by a mind).

So, that’s “category monism” – claiming that there’s only one category that covers everything: either that everything is made out of atoms in motion, or else that everything is made out of a non-physical substance such as ideas. (The former view is, of course, far more common than the latter.)

(2) ABSOLUTE MONISM (also called “substantial monism”) on the other hand, says that everything is the same substance – that there is only one thing in the entire universe and that all apparently different things in the universe are simply expressions of the one thing (the one substance) that truly exists. For instance, the British philosophy F H Bradley [1846-1924] argued that reality consists of one, all-inclusive Absolute Being. For the “absolute monist” everything that exists (you, me, George Bush, John Howard, that lamp post, this ball-point pen, the chair you’re sitting on) are all the same One Thing. Thus Spinoza [1632-77] argued that there is only one substance, or independently existing thing, and that everything is an aspect of this one substance.

“Absolute monism” is foundational to both Hinduism and Buddhism. Eastern philosophers will often argue that apparently different things are illusions (there is no real lamp post, or ball-point pen, or chair) and that only the Ultimate – the One Thing – is real. The monist sees all as “one”: God and the universe are one thing.

That, then, is “absolute monism” – claiming that the apparently messy world of bits and pieces around us is, in reality, one single amorphous undifferentiated Thing, and all the apparently different “things” are merely brief “sparks” that come and go within the one Absolute Being.

PLURALISM denies both kinds of monism.

(1) Pluralism denies “category monism”.

Pluralism denies that everything can be reduced to a single category. Pluralism denies that mind can be reduced to matter, or that matter can be reduced to mind. The pluralist who was combating “category monism” would argue, for example, that a poem consists of (at least) two categories – the physical and the non-physical. The physical part of the poem consists of marks on paper (or, if it’s spoken aloud, of sound waves in the air). But no analysis of the marks on the paper, or the sound waves in the air (even if you take that analysis down to the atomic, or sub-atomic, level) will catch the essence of the poem. In addition to its physical component, or expression, a poem also consists of something which is essentially non-physical – something of mind or spirit (or both). A poem, the pluralist says, is an example of the multi-level, multi-category nature of reality. And the same sort of argument can be mounted for a great piece of music, and for many other things.

The pluralist will go on to say that materialist-category-monism cannot adequately account for the spiritual experiences human beings have (and for such things as loving and being loved). At the same time, the pluralist will say, idealist-category-monism cannot adequately account for the hard reality of the physical world around us that we bump into all the time.

(2) Pluralism also denies “absolute monism”.

Pluralism denies that everything is really the Same Thing. In the first place, the pluralist argues, “absolute monism” is counter-intuitive: it flies in the face of common sense. “I can know things I cannot prove,” says the pluralist (following G E Moore’s [1873-1958] classic appeal to common sense), “and I can simply KNOW that I am not the Same Thing as the ball-point pen that I write with or the chair that I sit on.” As a result of this common sense stumbling block (combined, perhaps, with the influence of modern science) there has been no major advocate of “absolute monism” in among western philosophers since the time of Bradley. Indeed, among western philosophers “absolute monism” is today regarded as lacking intellectual rigour.

But opposition to “absolute monism” is much older than modern western philosophy.

Back in the 13th century Thomas Aquinas [1224-74] argued that God is a metaphysically simply Being – and that there can only be one such metaphysically simple Being. However, said Aquinas, there can be other kinds of beings: namely composite beings. God, for example, is an infinite kind of being, while all creatures are finite kinds of beings. God is pure actuality; all creatures are composed of both actuality and potentiality. Hence, finite things differ from God in that they have a limiting potentiality; while God does not. Finite things can differ from each other in whether their potentiality is completely actualised or whether it is progressively actualised. But in all creatures their essence (their “what-ness”) is really distinct from their existence (their “is-ness”). However, God’s essence and existence are identical. Thus the one cannot be reduced to the other: creation cannot be reduced to being the same as God.

Thus “pluralism” is foundational to Christianity. The Christian intellectual tradition holds that monism fails to do justice to the distinction between God and creation: God is the one eternal reality who brings creation into existence separate from Himself (although governed, ruled and loved by Himself).

Conclusion: the over generalisations of monism blurs important (and real) distinctions.

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