

Metaphysics
Concept and Problems

Theodor W.
Adorno

METAPHYSICS

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METAPHYSICS

Concept and Problems

Theodor W. Adorno

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LECTURE ONE

11 May 1965

When I announced these lectures, I gave the title as 'Metaphysics' and the subtitle as 'Concept and Problems'. The subtitle was not chosen without a good deal of thought, as the concept of metaphysics already raises considerable difficulties. And I will tell you straight away that it is my intention first to discuss the concept of metaphysics, and then to talk paradigmatically about specific metaphysical problems – indeed, it cannot be otherwise. And I shall present these problems in the context in which I have encountered them in my own dialectical work.¹ It can undoubtedly be said that the concept of metaphysics is the vexed question of philosophy. On one hand, philosophy owes its existence to metaphysics. That is to say that metaphysics – if I might first borrow the standard philosophical language, although I may later replace it by something else – deals with the so-called 'last things' on account of which human beings first began to philosophize. On the other hand, however, the situation of metaphysics is such that it is extremely difficult to indicate what its subject matter is. This is not only because the existence of this subject matter is questionable and is even the cardinal problem of metaphysics, but also, even if the existence or non-existence of its subject matter is disregarded, because it is very difficult to say what metaphysics actually is. Today metaphysics is used in almost the entire non-German-speaking world as a term of abuse, a synonym for idle speculation, mere nonsense and heaven knows what other intellectual vices.

It is not only difficult, therefore, to give you a preliminary idea of what metaphysics is, as those of you who are studying individual

disciplines will no doubt already have been told; but, as I said, it is very difficult even to define its subject with any precision. I recall my own early experience as a schoolboy when I first came across Nietzsche, who, as any of you who are familiar with his work will know, is not sparing in his complaints about metaphysics; and I remember how difficult I found it to get my bearings with regard to metaphysics. When I sought the advice of someone considerably older than myself, I was told that it was too early for me to understand metaphysics but that I would be able to do so one day. Thus, the answer to the question about the subject matter of metaphysics was postponed. That is an accident of biography, but if we look at metaphysical systems or philosophies themselves, we cannot escape the suspicion that what happens in them is not so very different to what was expressed in that piece of advice. I mean that the whole, immeasurable effort of philosophy, which once saw itself as preliminary work to metaphysics, a propaedeutic, has become autonomous and has replaced it. Or, when philosophy finally concerns itself with metaphysics itself, we are consoled, as in Kant,² for example, with endless possible answers to the metaphysical questions. And then, instead of being given an answer to these questions – if I can express it from the standpoint of metaphysics – we are given considerations on whether we have the right to pose those metaphysical questions at all. So that the naive postponement and procrastination that I experienced is not really so accidental; it seems to have something to do with the subject matter itself, and especially with the general procedure which philosophy adopts in relation to metaphysics – which still takes the Kantian form of a *progressus ad infinitum*, an infinite, or indefinitely continuing progression of knowledge, from which it is to be hoped that, at a time which will never arrive, the so-called basic metaphysical questions will finally have been resolved.

I mentioned Nietzsche. In his work the concept of metaphysics often crops up in the form of a joke, which, however, contains a first approximation of what actually is to be understood by metaphysics. He talks of the *Hinterwelt* – the ‘back-world’ – and calls those who concern themselves with metaphysics, or even practise or teach it, *Hinterweltler*³ – ‘backworldsmen’ – an allusion to the word ‘backwoodsmen’ (*Hinterwäldler*) commonly used at that time, which, of course, was shortly after the American Civil War. It referred to those living in the backwoods, that darkest province of the Midwest, from which Lincoln, a highly topical figure at that time, had emerged. This word implies that metaphysics is a doctrine which assumes the existence of a world behind *the* world we know and can know. Behind the world of phenomena there was supposed to be concealed

– here Nietzsche’s definition becomes an ironic comment on the Platonic tradition – a truly real, permanent, unchanging world existing in itself, a world of essences, to unravel and reveal which was the task of philosophy. Expressed more objectively, metaphysics was presented as the quintessence of the philosophical theory of all that pertained to the Beyond or – to use the specific philosophical term for the realm beyond experience – a science of the transcendental in contradistinction to the sphere of immanence. But at the same time, Nietzsche’s term ‘back-world’ also poured scorn – in the spirit of the nominalist Enlightenment – on the superstition and provinciality which, in his view, automatically adhered to the assumption of such a world behind the world. I think it would be useful, therefore, to reflect for a moment on this doctrine of Nietzsche’s, which equated metaphysics ironically – for he well knew, of course, that it is not literally the case – with occultism. Historically, metaphysics not only has nothing to do with occultism, but it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that it has been conceived expressly in opposition to occult thinking, as is quite manifest in one of the greatest thinkers of the modern age who is metaphysical in the specific sense, Leibniz. Admittedly, in genetic terms – with which we shall be concerned repeatedly in the course of our reflections – it is undeniable that metaphysics itself is a phenomenon of the secularization of mythical and magical thinking, so that it is not so absolutely detached from superstitious ideas as it understands itself to be, and as it has presented itself in the history of philosophy. Moreover, it is interesting in this connection that occultist organizations – throughout the world, as far as I am aware – always have a certain tendency to call themselves ‘metaphysical associations’ or something of that kind. This is interesting in several respects: firstly, because occultism, that apocryphal and, in higher intellectual society, offensive belief in spirits, gains respectability through association with something bathed in the nimbus of Aristotle, St Thomas Aquinas and heaven knows who else; but secondly (and this seems almost more interesting), because the occultists, in calling themselves metaphysicians, have an inkling of a fact profoundly rooted in occultism: that it stands in a certain opposition to theology. They have a sense that the things with which they are concerned, precisely through their opposition to theology, touch on metaphysics rather than theology – which, however, they are equally fond of enlisting as support when it suits them. All the same, one might here quote the statement by one of the test subjects we questioned in our investigations for *The Authoritarian Personality*. He declared that he believed in astrology because he did not believe in God.⁴ I shall just mention this fact in passing. I believe this

line of thought will take us a very long way, but I can only offer a prelude to it here.

What can be said at once, however, is that no philosophical metaphysics has ever been concerned with spirits in the sense of existing beings, since metaphysics from the first – that is, from Plato or Aristotle – has protested against and distinguished itself from precisely the idea of something existing in the sense of crude facticity, in the sense of the scattered individual things which Plato calls *τά ὄντα*. Incidentally, I shall have something to say very soon on the question whether metaphysics began with Plato or with Aristotle.⁵ It may be that there are certain metaphysical directions which are called spiritualistic – that of Berkeley, for example, or (with major qualifications) of Leibniz, although the Leibnizian monad is not so absolutely separate from actual, physical existence as has been taught by the neo-Kantian interpretation of Leibniz. But if spiritualistic tendencies exist in philosophy, in metaphysics, and if it has been argued that the Irish Bishop Berkeley, who might be said to have been at the same time an extreme empiricist and an extreme metaphysician, really taught only the reality of spirits, these are not to be understood as ‘spirits’ in the ordinary sense, but as purely intellectual entities determined by mind alone, on which everything actual is founded. It is not possible to ascribe to them the kind of factual existence with which they are endowed, prior to criticism or even reflection, by occultism and spiritualism in their various guises. I believe, therefore, that you would do well to exclude straight away from metaphysics any such idea of actually existing entities which could be experienced beyond our empirical, spatial-temporal world – or at least to exclude them as far as the philosophical tradition of metaphysics is concerned.

Metaphysics – and this may well bring me closer to a definition of what you may understand by that term – always deals with concepts. Metaphysics is the form of philosophy which takes concepts as its objects. And I mean concepts in a strong sense, in which they are almost always given precedence over, and are assigned to a higher order of being (*Wesenhaftigkeit*) than, existing things (*das Seiende*) or the facts subsumed under them, and from which the concepts are derived. The controversy on this point – the debate whether concepts are mere signs and abbreviations, or whether they are autonomous, having an essential, substantial being in themselves – has been regarded as one of the great themes of western metaphysics⁶ since Plato and Aristotle. In the form of the famous nominalist dispute, this question preoccupied the Middle Ages and, as I shall show you shortly,⁷ is almost directly prefigured in conflicting motifs within Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. And because the concept is, of course, an

instrument of knowledge, the question of the nature of the concept has from the first been both a metaphysical and an epistemological one. This may help you to understand why, for as long as metaphysics has existed – that is, for as long as concepts have been subjected to reflection – metaphysics has been entwined with problems of logic and epistemology in an extremely curious way, which culminated in Hegel's teaching that logic and metaphysics are really one and the same.⁸ Now, by indicating to you how metaphysics stands, on one hand, in relation to the occult and, on the other, to religion, I have arrived at an historical dimension which may have a not unimportant bearing on the concept of metaphysics itself. I should remark in passing that, in my view, one cannot make progress in philosophy with purely verbal definitions, by simply defining concepts. Many of you will have heard this from me *ad nauseam*, and I ask you to excuse me if I repeat it once more for those to whom I have not yet preached on this subject. I believe that while philosophy may well terminate in definitions, it cannot start out from them; and that, in order to understand, to have knowledge of, the content of philosophical concepts themselves – and not simply from the point of view of an external history of ideas or of philosophy – it is necessary to know how concepts have come into being, and what they mean in terms of their origins, their historical dimension.⁹

Turning now to this dimension, which interests me especially in this context, it is the case that, historically, the positivist school is expressly contrasted to theology. I refer here to positivism in the form in which it first appeared, as a conception of sociology as the supreme and true science, and, indeed, as the true philosophy. This opposition to religion is explicit in Auguste Comte and implicit in his teacher Saint-Simon, even if the terms are not yet used in this way. Both these thinkers develop theories involving stages, a philosophy of history which moves in three great phases. The first of these is the theological phase, the second the metaphysical and the third the scientific or, as those thinkers liked to call it one hundred and fifty or two hundred years ago, the 'positive' phase.¹⁰ They thereby pointed to something which is essential to metaphysics according to its own concept, and which thus helps to explain what I said to you a few minutes ago, when I stated that metaphysics is essentially concerned with concepts, and with concepts in a strong sense. For according to these positivist theories of stages, both the natural divinities and the God of the monotheists were first secularized, but were then held fast in their turn as something objective, existing in itself, like the old gods earlier.¹¹ Now, it is interesting to note that the positivists were especially ill-disposed towards metaphysics, because it had to do with

concepts and not with facts, whereas the positive theologies had described their deities as factual, existent beings. And accordingly, in the writings of the positivists you will find more invective against metaphysics than against theology. This applies especially to Auguste Comte who, in his late phase, had the delusive idea of turning science itself into a kind of cult, something like a positive religion.

It must be added, nevertheless, that metaphysics is often associated with theology in popular consciousness; and there are doubtless more than a few among you who tend to draw no very sharp distinction between the concepts of theology and metaphysics, and to lump them together under the general heading of transcendence. But now that we have to concern ourselves specifically with these concepts, I should like to invite you, if you still approach these questions with a certain naivety, to differentiate – and of course, progress in philosophical thinking is, in general, essentially progress in differentiation. I believe it can be stated more or less as a dogma that philosophical insight is more fruitful the more it is able to differentiate within its subject matter; and that the undifferentiating approach which measures everything by the same yardstick actually embodies precisely the coarse and, if I might put it like this, the uneducated mentality which philosophy, in its subjective, pedagogical role, is supposed to overcome or, as I'd prefer to say, to eliminate. Now it is certainly true that metaphysics has something in common with theology in its manner of seeking to elevate itself above immanence, above the empirical world. To put it somewhat more crudely, the widespread equating of metaphysics and theology, which comes about if one fails to reflect expressly on these concepts, can be traced back simply to something which pre-exists and predominates in the mental formation of all of us, even if we are not directly aware of it. It is the fact that the teachings of the Catholic church are indissolubly linked to metaphysical speculation, and in particular, as you all must know, to Aristotelian speculation in the form in which it was passed down through the great Arabian philosophers to those of the High Middle Ages, and above all to St Thomas Aquinas.¹² But even that is not so simple. And you may gain an idea of the tension between metaphysics and theology that I have referred to if you consider that at the time of the rise of Christianity in late antiquity, when Christianity was introduced as the state religion even in Athens, the schools of philosophy still existing there, which we should call metaphysical schools, were closed and suppressed with great brutality.¹³ And, I would remark in passing, precisely the same thing was repeated in the great theological reaction of Islam against the Aristotelian Islamic philosophers, although this happened at a time when the metaphysical heritage,

mediated through the Islamic philosophers, had already won its place in Christian Europe. In late antiquity, therefore, metaphysics was regarded as something specifically subversive with regard to Christianity. And the fanatical Islamic monks who drove the philosophers into exile regarded it in a very similar way. The reason why they took this attitude may well show up very clearly the differences I should like to establish between metaphysics and theology. It is quite certain that metaphysics and theology cannot simply be distinguished from each other as historical stages, as the positivists tried to do, since they have constantly overlapped historically: one appeared at the same time as the other; one was forgotten, only to re-emerge in the foreground. They form an extraordinarily complex structure which cannot be reduced to a simple conceptual formula. Nevertheless, there is an element of truth in the theory of stages that I referred to, in that metaphysics in the traditional sense – and we have to start from the traditional concept if I am to make clear to you what metaphysics really means – is an attempt to determine the absolute, or the constitutive structures of being, on the basis of thought alone. That is, it does not derive the absolute dogmatically from revelation, or as something positive which is simply given to me, as something directly existing, through revelation or recorded revelation, but, to repeat the point, it determines the absolute through concepts.

And to say this is really to pose the fundamental problem of metaphysics, which has accompanied it throughout its history, and which also confronted it in, for example, the critique of metaphysics by Kant, as it presented itself to him at that time, in the guise of the Leibniz–Wolffian school. It is the problem that thought, which in its conditionality is supposed to be sufficient to have knowledge only of the conditional, presumes to be the mouthpiece, or even the origin, of the unconditional. This problem, which manifested itself in the violent reaction of theologies against metaphysics earlier, points at the same time to one of the core problems, if not to *the* core problem, of metaphysics. Thought, it might be said, has within it the tendency to disintegrate traditional, dogmatic ideas. It has that tendency even in Socrates, who taught what Kant would have called a metaphysics of morals, and who is regarded as having disintegrated the traditional state religion. This explains the occasional alliances between positivism and positive religion against metaphysics – against the disintegrating force which they both detected in it. Autonomous thought is a mouthpiece of the transcendent, and is thus always in danger – when it approaches the transcendent through metaphysics – of making common cause with it. And I believe it is a characteristic which can be ascribed, in a perhaps hasty but not unfounded

generalization, at least to all the traditional metaphysical systems known to me, that while these systems have always been critically disposed towards anything they regarded as dogmatic or fixed ideas, they have attempted, on the other hand, to rescue, on the basis of thought alone, that to which the dogmatic or transcendent ideas referred. This tension runs through the whole of metaphysical thinking, and I shall have occasion to define it very precisely for you using the example of Aristotle. If metaphysics and theology did finally come to an agreement, it was an alliance roughly comparable – if you will allow me the sociological language – to that between feudalism and bourgeois forces which can be observed at certain times in more recent history. Both find themselves confronted by a common foe, whether it be the radical, Enlightenment thinking of positivism, or, on occasion, materialism, as precipitated to a greater or lesser degree in Marxian theories, for example, whether those theories were rightly or wrongly understood. It is probably characteristic only of present-day metaphysics that it has relinquished its opposition to theology, while theology only felt obliged to assimilate metaphysics at a stage when the bourgeoisie was relatively advanced, at the high point of the urban culture of the Middle Ages. It did so in order to justify itself apologetically before the mature consciousness of the urban bourgeois, who wanted to know how the revealed wisdom stood in relation to their own developed and emancipated reason. The Thomist system is a grandiose attempt to derive this justification of revelation from metaphysics, while that of Duns Scotus is an almost desperate one.

At any rate, the first point I would ask you to note¹⁴ is that metaphysical systems in the precise sense are doctrines according to which concepts form a kind of objective, constitutive support on which what is naively called ‘the objective world’, that is, scattered, individual, existing things, is founded and finally depends. You may recall that I pointed out earlier in today’s lecture that the question whether concepts are real or are merely signs, that is, the dispute between nominalism and realism, is itself carried on within metaphysical enquiry – just as, originally, the realists and the nominalists were not opposed schools of metaphysicians and anti-metaphysicians respectively. Rather, these two schools – both in Islam and in medieval philosophy – were schools which arose and fought each other *within* metaphysical thinking. This reveals something which is important if you are to avoid confusion in thinking about the concept of metaphysics. This concept has undergone a certain formalization which can also be seen as a part of its disintegration, in that the mere treatment of metaphysical questions – regardless of the outcome – is

now treated as metaphysics, and not just positive teachings about concepts as entities existing in themselves. Both things, therefore, the doctrine of the 'back-world' and the doctrine which repudiates this back-world, would fall equally, and dubiously, within the field of metaphysical problems, according to this formalized or generalized concept. I say dubiously because there is a temptation here to draw a false conclusion which is constantly encountered in the field of vulgar apologetics. Whether one is *for* metaphysics or *against* metaphysics, both positions are metaphysical, both depend on ultimate positions about which it is not possible to argue, whereas the nature and operation of concepts lie precisely in the fact that it is entirely possible to argue about them, and that, in general, if the anti-metaphysical position is subsumed under the concept of metaphysics, it is deprived of its critical edge, its polemical or dialectical potency. Thus, one speaks formally, for example, of metaphysical materialism (in contradistinction to historical materialism), in which matter is designated as the ultimate ground of being, as the truly existent, as was once the case in the thought of Leucippus and Democritus. You can observe similar things in present-day theology, where, if anything is said about the name of God and His existence or non-existence, there is much rejoicing over the fact that God is mentioned at all, regardless of whether the speaker is 'for' or 'against' God. This, I would think, is enough to indicate that the present time, to put it cautiously, is unlikely to be the most propitious for the building of cathedrals. On the other hand, it is the case – one should add for the sake of justice – that in the thought of such early so-called anti-metaphysicians and materialists as Leucippus and Democritus, the *structure* of the metaphysical, of the absolute and final ground of explanation, is nevertheless preserved within their materialistic thought. If one calls these materialists *metaphysical* materialists, because matter for them is the ultimate ground of being, one does not entirely miss the mark. But this designation already contains a critical moment with regard to these early philosophers, a moment which led in the course of further reflection to a critique of what they taught.

Notes for
LECTURE TWO

13 May 1965¹

Link: this formalization² is expressed in the formal character of the usual definitions.

The usual definition as, for example, the ultimate ground or cause of existing things; according to this, with the 'scientification' of philosophy, metaphysics is supposed to be the fundamental science.

Metaphysics seen accordingly as the doctrine of primary being (or primary substance), of πρώτη οὐσία.³ The ambiguity of this: primary for us, or in itself.

*Yet there are also doctrines, like some Gnostic teachings (e.g. Marcion),⁴ or that of the late Scheler on the divinity as a becoming,⁵ and some speculations of Schelling,⁶ which, again, do not conform to this concept.⁷ E.g. metaphysics as the doctrine of the abiding does not necessarily coincide with the concept of metaphysics. While I can mention themes of metaphysics, such as being, ground of being, nothingness, God, freedom, immortality, becoming, truth, spirit...**
Insertion 2 a⁸

[Insertion 2 a:] While most metaphysics seeks invariants, its subjects vary. E.g. the concept of force is hardly discussed in it today (natural science!),⁹ likewise that of life (largely replaced by existence). One speaks of fashions; but the so-called fashions of philosophy are indices of something deeper. Demonstrate by the example of life.

The metaphysical question which preoccupied the entire seventeenth century, psyche and physis and the problem of psycho-physical