

# 4

## The Nature of Reality

*Humankind cannot bear very much reality.*

—T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton”



### Opening Questions

1. How “real” are the following items? (Rate them on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 is most real, 1 is least real.)

The person sitting next to you	_____
The chair you are sitting in	_____
God	_____
The planet Uranus	_____
Beethoven’s music	_____
The headache you had last night	_____
Human rights	_____
Electrons	_____
The woman or man in ( <i>not</i> “of”) your dreams	_____
Angels	_____
The number 7	_____
Water	_____
Ice	_____
Love	_____
Beauty	_____
Genes	_____
The theory of relativity	_____
Einstein’s brain (when he was alive)	_____
Einstein’s ideas	_____
Your own mind	_____
The color red	_____

A red sensation (in your own mind)	_____
“Unreal numbers”	_____
The NFL	_____
Your own body	_____
Your soul	_____

- Do you believe that the earth is flat and does not move, while the stars, sun, moon, and planets circle around it in more or less regularly shaped orbits? If not, why not? (If so, why?)
- If a tree falls in the forest when there’s no one around to hear it, does it make a sound? Why or why not? If no one ever sees, hears, or touches the tree itself, what sense does it make to say that the tree is “real”?
- Does the universe itself have a purpose? If so, what is this purpose? If not, is it, as some modern philosophers have argued, just a universe of “matter in motion”—particles and electromagnetic fields acting according to the laws of physics?

## The Real World



Much of what we believe about the world we believe on faith. As children, we believed what our parents told us, often without understanding it and only rarely testing their answers for ourselves. Most people most of the time throughout most of history have believed that **reality**—the ultimate nature of the world—was pretty much what their religious leaders told them it was, whether the world was a flat island or a plate on the back of an elephant supported on the back of a tortoise supported by another turtle (and from there on, “turtles all the way down,” according to a traditional Indian tale) or an infinite expanse bounded only by God.

In this chapter we consider basic philosophical questions about reality, beginning with the one we have just raised: what is real? We proceed to discuss the traditional view that reality admits of degrees, so that some things are more real than others. The exciting philosophical question then becomes: what is most real? The next several sections comprise an historical survey of some of the answers of ancient Greek philosophers, who were divided on the issue of whether ultimate reality is material or immaterial. We devote particular attention to Plato’s two-worlds theory, which attempts to explain the connection between the immaterial world that he takes to be ultimately real and the everyday appearances of material things. From this we segue into the questions of whether minds, physical bodies, or both are real, and if the latter, how minds and bodies are related. Taking the latter question first, we discuss Descartes’s view that mind and body are separate substances, and then the alternative views of Berkeley and Leibniz. We then return to the question of what is most real and consider the arguments given by modern German philosophers in defense of idealism (the view that ideas

and minds are ultimately real) along with the modern resurgence of the two-worlds theory. We next consider the question of teleology, the issue of whether the world has any ultimate purpose, and close with some observations about two general beliefs shared by virtually all Western philosophers: the belief that reality endures and that reality coheres into a unity.

Today most of us believe that reality is what our scientists tell us it is. None of us has ever seen or felt an atom. Very few of us could even offer any evidence that there is such a thing as our solar system, despite the fact that we have been looking at charts and drawings of it ever since we were children. When students are asked why they think that the sun doesn't move around the earth (as our very language, with words like *sunrise* and *sunset*, would seem to indicate), only a small number of them may be capable of giving any half-convincing answers.

Contemporary scientists do theorize about what is ultimately real, but such theories often make use of mathematically subtle concepts that are scarcely describable from a layperson's point of view. String theory, for example, postulates that the fundamental reality consists of tiny vibrating "strings," which may be a closed loop or, alternatively, open. Furthermore, although themselves simple particles, the strings have reality in nine or ten spatial dimensions (or 26 dimensions according to some versions of the theory) and can vibrate along any of these dimensions. We find ourselves puzzling over this idea if we try to visualize it. The main merit of string theory is that it unifies a number of theories of basic physical forces in a way that is consistent with both quantum mechanics and Einstein's theory of general relativity. However, most of us are not able to follow the complicated mathematics that demonstrate these theoretical gains, and as yet no one has provided any experimental verification of the theory.

### Science and Reality

*The learned physicist and the man in the street were standing together on the threshold, about to enter a room.*

*The man in the street moved forward without trouble, planted his foot on a solid unyielding plank at rest before him, and entered.*

*The physicist was faced with an intricate problem. To make any movement he must shove against the atmosphere, which presses with a force of 14 pounds on every square inch of his body. He must land on a plank travelling at 20 miles per second around the sun—a fraction of a second earlier or later the plank would be miles away. He must do this while hanging from a round planet, head outward into space. . . . He reflects too that the plank itself is not what it appears to be . . . it is mostly emptiness, very sparsely scattered in that emptiness are myriads of electrical charges dashing about at great speeds. . . . It is like stepping on a swarm of flies.*

—Sir Arthur Eddington,  
English astrophysicist, 1882–1944

In any case, such theories indicate that even if we think the “real” thing is the material object, there are many levels on which that material thing might be described: such as the chair you are sitting on, for example. Is it the wood or other material it is made of, the molecular structure of that material, the atoms that compose them, the subatomic particles? Or is it something immaterial—the idea of a chair, which guided the chair’s designer and anyone involved in its construction?

Before science came to claim complete domination over our picture of reality, during the past several centuries the ready answer to the question of what is ultimately real was *God*. According to this view, the material universe is real only insofar as it is kept in existence by God. (In fact, for hundreds of years it was considered heresy to believe that what was ultimately real were the “illusory speculations” of the scientists.) Also real were souls, angels, and other spiritual beings, whether or not these could be observed or tested by science. In the modern scientific worldview, which most of us accept without question, on the other hand, what is real is the physical universe.

The reality of such nonphysical things as numbers, spirits, minds, souls, angels, and even God is at least questionable—and if they are to be believed in, they must be justified somehow, preferably by appeal to the physical universe. Thus, minds are believable because they explain why various bodies behave as they do. And belief in God can be defended, for example, by the so-called argument from design, from the intricacy of the physical universe (see pp. 91–92).

### God as Reality

*The perennial Philosophy is primarily concerned with the one divine reality—substantial to the manifold world of things and lives and minds. But the nature of this one Reality is such that it cannot be directly and immediately apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfill certain conditions, making themselves loving, pure in heart and poor in spirit. Why should this be so? We do not know. It is just one of those facts we have to accept, whether we like them or not and however implausible and unlikely they may seem.*

—Aldous Huxley,  
*The Perennial Philosophy*, 1946

We can see from the start that an answer to the question “What is real?” might begin with two very different starting points: an appeal to science on the one hand and an appeal to religion on the other. A religious person might still accept the findings of science, of course; philosophers such as Pascal and Leibniz were religious men as well as scientists. But for the religious person, the order of the universe is first of all a sign of the infinite wisdom and goodness of God. The scientist, however, approaches reality as being measurable and testable.

## What Is Most Real?



In Opening Question 1, the point of asking you to rank as “real” various entities (the more proper philosophical word for “things”) was to make some preliminary, crude attempt to get you to order your own sense of reality. This is what philosophers call an **ontology**. Ontology is essentially the study of what is real and the effort to establish a hierarchy of levels of reality; an ontology is a specific taxonomy of entities in accordance with such a hierarchy. Some people will formulate a commonsense ontology, with the most real entities being chairs, bodies, people; some will take a more scientific viewpoint and say that what is most real are those things discovered (or postulated) by science, like ions and genes. Other people will take a more spiritual approach and rank God highest, along with soul; some will always take people to be most real. Most people have the most trouble figuring out where to place such peculiar entities as Beethoven’s music and the number 7.

Some people say that *nothing* is real and give a low ranking to virtually every entity on the list. We might then ask, “Real—compared to what?” For what becomes evident in such an exercise is the fact that “reality” is an **evaluative** term, a way of weighing what is most basic to our view of the world. To say that nothing is real is to say, in effect, that we don’t believe in the world at all or, for that matter, in the existence of our own minds believing in the world. Surely, there is something odd about this. On the other hand, some people (including some important philosophers) have said that *everything* on the list is real. In fact, one might say this: everything is “real” for the kind of thing that it is. (Thus, the number 7 is real as a number; Beethoven’s music is real as music; angels are real as angels; and the person sitting next to you is real in the way that people in general are real.) But this clever answer tends to miss the point of ontology, which is to discover what is *most* real, what is *most* basic, and what is to be accounted for in terms of what. If we say that in their own way Sherlock Holmes, or the Loch Ness monster, or the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow are just as real as you, me, and other people, as your own dog, or as the pots and pans in your friend’s kitchen, then we seem to have lost our grasp of the notion of “reality” altogether. The whole purpose of thinking about reality is to somehow separate what is most basic and undeniable in the world from what is less so.

### Appearance and Reality

*The distinction that causes the most trouble in philosophy is the distinction between “appearance” and “reality,” between what things seem to be and what they are. The painter wants to know what things seem to be, the practical man and the philosopher want to know what they are . . . but if reality is not what appears, have we any means of knowing whether there is any reality at all?*

—Bertrand Russell,  
*The Problems of Philosophy*, 1912

## The Reality Behind the Appearances

Now, why should this question “What is real?” be so important? Consider this: Our dog (and your dog, too) couldn’t conceive of such a question. The dog certainly learns a complex series of causes and effects (when the can opener whirs, he learns to expect dinner). He might also learn to ignore certain experiences as unimportant or untrustworthy. But what he never seems to learn is *explanation*. He never asks, “Why?” He apparently has only expectations, not theories. The connection between the can opener and dog food is enough for him; his life is seemingly a sequence of events, most of them expected, a few of them unexpected, but he cannot account for the connections between them, or presumably even follow such an account.

A child, on the other hand, asks “Why?” persistently. “How does a watch work?” for example. We could, if we wished, take it apart and show the child the mechanism. The surface movements are not enough for us; we want to know what is inside. Simply being aware of the sequence of lightning–thunder is not enough for us: we want to know what causes them, whether it is the bad temper of Zeus or the collision of convection currents in the atmosphere. And so we begin to postulate a **reality behind the appearances**, an attempt to account for the sequence of events that are seen in terms of other events unseen. “Primitive” mythologies populate this world behind the scenes with spirits, demons, gods, and goddesses. Science populates it with atoms and electrons and electromagnetic forces. Christianity fills it with God and a spiritual world only dimly perceived by those of us in this one—that eternal world is far more important than the mere passing appearances of this one.

The distinction between what we simply see, what *appears* to be the case, and the “deeper” picture that allows us to explain it, forces us to introduce the concept of “reality.” This concept enables us to distinguish the ways things appear to us and their inner reality, and we learn to explain things to ourselves and make sense of them.

### Essence and Appearance

*Only as creators!—This has given me the greatest trouble and still does: to realize that what things are called is incomparably more important than what they are. The reputation, name, and appearance, the usual measure and weight of a thing, what it counts for—originally almost always wrong and arbitrary, thrown over things like a dress and altogether foreign to their nature and even to their skin—all this grows from generation unto generation, merely because people believe in it, until it gradually grows to be part of the thing and turns into its very body. What at first was appearance becomes in the end, almost invariably, the essence and effective as such. How foolish it would be to suppose that one only needs to point out this origin and this misty shroud of delusion in order to destroy the world*

*that counts for real, so-called “reality.” We can destroy only as creators.—  
But let us not forget either: it is enough to create new names and estima-  
tions and probabilities in order to create in the long run new “things.”*

— Friedrich Nietzsche,  
*The Gay Science*, 1882

From: Trans. W. Kaufman. New York: Vintage, 1974. §58.

## The Basis of Metaphysics

In what we have said already in this chapter, we have anticipated some of the main themes of what philosophers call **metaphysics**. Metaphysics is the attempt to say what reality is. **Cosmology**, or how we think the most real things have come into being, is one of the components of metaphysics; another is ontology, the study of what is. In developing an ontology, as part of our attempt to formulate our metaphysical views, we have to evaluate the different entities in the world, picking out those that are most basic.

We have already anticipated two of the tests that often are imposed on this notion of what is “most real.” First, that which is most real is that upon which all else is dependent. For a religious person, God is most real because all else depends on him; for a scientist, what is most real are the principles and particles on which all of reality can be reasoned to be based. Second, that which is most real is that which itself is not created or destroyed. It does not change. Thus, God created the earth, and he can destroy it, but God was neither created nor can God be destroyed. You can destroy a chair, by burning it up or chopping it to pieces, but you cannot destroy the basic particles and forces out of which the chair is made. When we look back to the very beginnings of Western philosophy and metaphysics, when people first made the attempt to formulate their view of the world in terms of what was most real and what was not, we find these same two tests being invoked. Indeed, both modern science and modern theology, as well as Western philosophy itself, are continuations of this same ancient metaphysical tradition.

In this chapter we will primarily consider the basic metaphysical question of what is real. However, we should note that the range of matters covered by the term “metaphysics” is considerably broader, and that different issues have been given more or less prominence at various times. Some metaphysical questions—such as the question of how the mind and the body are related (considered in Chapter 6) and whether our actions are really free (considered in Chapter 7)—have been longstanding issues, but some answers have been proposed fairly recently as a consequence of developments in the sciences. Other topics have been taken up or recast in recent times, such as the relationship between time and space, how parts make up wholes, what could and what could not have been different from the way it actually is, and how we should understand our ideas about possibilities (which may or may not be actualized).

## The First Metaphysicians



### Thales

The disciplines of metaphysics and philosophy, as these are practiced in the Western tradition, began in the Aegean region about 2,600 hundred years ago. The first Western philosopher is generally agreed to have been a man named **Thales**, who lived from about 624 to 546 BCE. He was said to be somewhat eccentric: he once fell into a well while thinking about philosophy, but he also made a fortune on the olive oil market. His philosophy in a sentence was this: *water* is the ultimate reality.

This sounds simpleminded, but it was a momentous achievement, and it is not as silly as we might initially think. Try to suspend your knowledge of modern science—of the hundred-plus elements that have been discovered. Try to look at the world yourself; try to understand it in your own terms. And suppose you have the idea that, in order to make sense of the world, the first thing to do is to discover which element is most basic. (Remember that Greek science identified only four elements—earth, air, fire, and water.) And now try to imagine what the world is *ultimately* made up of.

What, you may ask, is so monumentally important about this? Whether the world is actually made of water is not really the issue. What Thales saw, and what we now take for granted, is a difference between the way the world *seems* to be and the way it *really* is. The world seems to be made of all kinds of different materials; it took a stroke of genius to suggest that all of these might be made out of a single basic element. Think how difficult life would be, to take but one simple example, if no one had ever noticed that water and ice were actually the same material under different conditions or if no one had ever discovered that basic food substances could be transformed (through mixing and heating) into an almost infinite variety of different things to eat. Modern scientific theory, which replaces Thales's initial theory about water with a complex system of elements and subatomic particles, is nevertheless an extension of the same strategy, to distinguish the way the world appears to be from the way it really is and to explain why it appears to be as it does. Once we have made this basic distinction, a whole new world opens up to us, a “real world,” behind (or above or below) appearances.

### The Pre-Socratic Materialists

After Thales, a number of other pre-Socratic philosophers challenged his view of water as the basic reality of the world and suggested theories of their own. A student of Thales named **Anaximander** went one step further than his teacher and suggested that everything was made of some basic “stuff” (his word was *apeiron*, or “indefinite”) that we could never experience as such; we could only know its manifestations.

**The West's Oldest Philosophical Fragment, from Anaximander**

*The Non-limited is the original material of existing things; further, the source from which existing things derive their existence is also that to which they return at their destruction, according to necessity; for they give justice and make reparation to one another for their injustice, according to the arrangement of time.*

— Sixth century BCE

From: Freeman, Kathleen. *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948.



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Anaximander had a student named **Anaximenes** who thought that everything was made of *air*, so water was thickened air and earth was thickened even more than that.

A philosopher named **Heraclitus** suggested alternatively that everything was more like *fire* than it was like the other elements—always changing and consuming.

Before those thinkers, called the pre-Socratics, philosophers both in Greece and in other societies had also made the distinction between the world of appearances and the real world—for example, by appealing to gods and goddesses behind the scenes. But the pre-Socratics made a monumental step forward: they now tried to explain the world, as it normally appeared to them, in a systematic way, not by appeal to the moods and whims of invisible deities. With the Greek philosophers, the daily world of appearances, in which different things simply happen one after another, is supplemented by another world, a world in which the world of appearances can be explained.

Today perhaps none of us has an ontology as simple as that of the pre-Socratics. It is clear to us that there is more to the world than earth, air, fire, water, and the possibility that there is some fifth element, “stuff,” which we have never seen. But the pre-Socratics, too, were aware that the world of ultimate reality might be more complex than at first they had imagined. Another pre-Socratic philosopher, **Democritus**, developed a picture of the world that is remarkably close to our current scientific views. He suggested that the world consisted of tiny indestructible elements, which he called **atoms** (derived from roots meaning “not cut” or “not divided”), that combined and recombined in various ways to give us the different elements and all the complex things of this world. These things might change, be created, and be destroyed, but the atoms themselves are eternal.

Only a little imagination is required to see that we debate the ultimate nature of reality in much the same terms as these ancient philosophers did. Democritus’s view is still very much with us; we no longer believe that atoms themselves are these most basic particles, but we still postulate some such basic elements. A few decades ago, protons, electrons, and neutrons were said to be the basic building blocks of reality. Today, physicists refer to even more basic building blocks, electrons, quarks, and leptons, or, according to string theory, vibrating strings that manifest as electrons and quarks. But even if the particles are still smaller, the idea is the same.

### Eternal Fire

*This world that is the same for all, neither any god nor any man shaped it, but it ever was and is and shall be ever-living Fire that kindles by measures and goes out by measures.*

—Heraclitus

### Ancient Materialism

**Thales** (624–546 BCE, Miletus)—Reality is ultimately water.

**Anaximander** (610–546 BCE, Miletus)—Reality is indefinite “stuff” (*apeiron*).

**Anaximenes** (585–528 BCE; Miletus)—Reality is essentially air.

**Heraclitus** (536–480 BCE; Ephesus)—Reality is like fire.

**Democritus** (460–371 BCE; Abdera)—Reality consists of tiny atoms.

\*All dates are approximate.

So, too, we can understand Heraclitus in modern terms as the view that the nature of ultimate reality is not matter but energy. This view, which became as powerful as it is now only in the late nineteenth century, rejects the traditional emphasis on physical matter (whether tangible matter such as earth or water, or microscopic building blocks such as atoms) and instead declares ultimate reality to be power and forces and energy states, which somehow produce matter as their effects. A still more modern concept would be the view that reality consists of neither matter nor energy as such but some more basic element—matter-energy—which can manifest itself as either matter *or* energy. This, of course, is much like the view of Anaximander.

Laypersons often talk as if modern science has established what the ultimate nature of reality is. But the basic debate—whether reality should be thought of in terms of basic building blocks or rather, perhaps, in larger, more holistic terms, whether matter or energy should be primary—still goes on. Some people clearly do interpret the universe as Democritus understood it, consisting of an elaborate order of singular elements that can be understood by taking them apart and analyzing them. Some people do see the world as Thales did: comprehensible, solid, and substantial, like a pool of water, like the Mediterranean. Some people see the world with Anaximander, as unknowable, mysterious, beyond everyday experiences. And some people see the world as constant energy and change, with excitement and enthusiasm being among its manifestations. Metaphysics is not just an ancient, unsophisticated set of views about science. Metaphysics is a basic outlook on the world, and its terms are much the same today as they were 2,500 years ago.

## Early Nonphysical Views of Reality



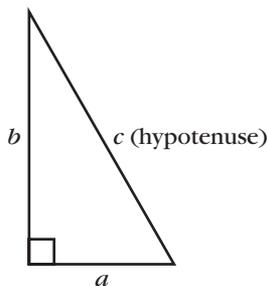
You have no doubt noticed that all five of the pre-Socratics we have named suggested that the basic element of reality was one of the *physical* elements (including “stuff” and “atoms,” even though we can’t sense them). But there were also

pre-Socratic philosophers who thought that ultimate reality was not physical at all. One of them was **Pythagoras**; he believed that the ultimate elements of reality were *numbers*. (If he had answered our opening questions, he would have given the number 7 a “10.”) For Pythagoras, numbers were eternal and indestructible; the things of this world were in some sense dependent upon numbers for their existence. The heavens, in particular, were divine examples of the mathematical order of the universe. (Pythagoras said that “the whole of heaven is a musical scale and a number.”) He and his followers also believed in the immortality of the soul and in reincarnation.

Why did Pythagoras think that numbers were more real than trees and tables? Because numbers were eternal; they never changed, whereas trees and tables could be chopped up, used for firewood, and destroyed. Reality, according to the view that has been dominant from then until now, is what underlies all change, what does not itself change. Another pre-Socratic philosopher, **Parmenides**, went so far as to suggest that the world of our everyday life, because it was so filled with changes and things coming into being and disappearing, could not be real at all. The other pre-Socratics had said that the things of our world were only *less* real than some more basic reality. Parmenides said that our world was actually *unreal*.

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**Pythagoras of Samos** (ca. 570–490) was the leading mathematician of the ancient world, as well as a philosopher who, in southern Italy, led a powerful religious cult whose views were at odds with most of the philosophy of pre-Socratic Greece. He believed in the immortality of the soul and in reincarnation, and he established a brotherhood of religious believers in which numbers and mathematics, as the basis of all things, held a special place in the universe. His discoveries in mathematics are still central to the sciences of geometry and acoustics. The Pythagorean theorem is named after him: “The sum of the squares of the two sides of a right triangle is equal to the square of the hypotenuse,” or “ $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ .” He was the first to prove it.



The Pythagoreans also placed great importance on the connections between mathematics and music. They noted, for instance, that if you halve the length of a vibrating string you produce the “same” note at a higher pitch (a discovery you can test for yourself on a guitar).

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The principle, that what is real is eternal and unchanging, formed the framework within which most of the pre-Socratics, and almost all modern individuals (including scientists and religious people) developed their view of the universe. One of the pre-Socratic philosophers, however, challenged this basic principle. This was Heraclitus, whom we have already met as the philosopher who believed that fire was the basic model for reality. But fire is a violent element, always changing and never the same. So Heraclitus came up with the suggestion that must have upset the other early philosophers even more than Parmenides telling them that the world they lived in wasn't really real. Heraclitus said that *change is real*, thus contradicting the basic principle that reality is what doesn't change. (One might say that the only thing that doesn't change is change itself, but this is a good way of tying yourself up in logical knots.) Heraclitus expressed the idea that everything is constantly in flux by saying that you cannot step in the same river twice. Some of his more radical followers claimed that in actual fact you cannot step in the same river once because there is no moment when the water is not in the process of flowing past. (On the other hand, it has been pointed out by some of his more facetious critics that you *can* step in the same river twice if, having stepped in once, you jump out, run downstream, and jump in again!)

We should note, however, that the Heraclitean view of reality is so radical that not even Heraclitus actually held to it. He may have believed that reality was change, but he also believed that underlying all change was an eternal principle, **logos**, that did not change. Thus, he did believe in eternal reality after all. In our own era, Einstein reiterated this view when he claimed that, although nature may change continuously, the laws of nature stay forever the same. But some philosophers and many scientists now believe that not even the laws are permanent; does this mean that nothing is real? Philosophers have argued about this for 2,500 years.

From our abbreviated discussion of the earliest Western philosophers, we can already see many of the possibilities for a metaphysics, an account of ultimate reality, according to which you can articulate your own understanding of the world.

### The Law of Logos

*Listen . . . not to me, but to the Logos.*

— Heraclitus

First, a metaphysics may hold that reality consists of purely *physical* or *material* components, whether these are elements such as water or fire or modern components such as atoms, electrons, quarks, and electromagnetic and intranuclear forces. This is called **materialism**.

### Ancient Immaterialism

**Pythagoras** (c. 570-c. 490, Samos)—Reality is ultimately numbers.

**Parmenides** (539–492 BCE, Elea)—Reality is unchanging and unknown to us.

**Zeno of Elea** (fifth century BCE)—Reality is unchanging and motion is unreal. (“Zeno’s paradoxes” were intended as proofs of this. See, for example, the paradox of the arrow on p. 21.)

**Heraclitus** (540–480 BCE, Ephesus)—Reality is change, but with an underlying *logos*, or logic. Thus, Heraclitus is sometimes interpreted as saying that reality is *logos*.

\*All dates are approximate.

Second, and opposed to materialism, is the view that the basic components of reality are not physical or material at all, but are, for example, spirits, or minds, or numbers. This is called **immaterialism**.

The whole history of Western thought, in fact, has tended to be split between these two sets of views. Most scientists are materialists, whereas many religions defend immaterialism. But many scientists are also religious, and they recognize the importance of immaterialism, too. And most religious thinkers recognize the material nature of the physical world. So one of the most enduring problems of philosophy is the reconciliation of the two.

## Plato’s Forms

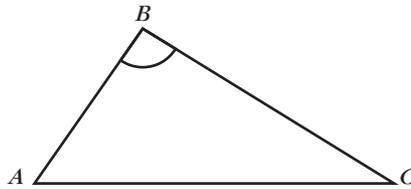


The ancient philosopher Plato (see p. 12) tried to have both materialism and immaterialism, but he clearly thought that what was more real were the immaterial entities, which he called **Forms**. The Forms represent Plato’s attempt to capture the mathematical insights of Pythagoras and to correlate *being* and *becoming*, following Parmenides and Heraclitus. Like Pythagoras, Plato emphasized the importance of form over material content. Like Parmenides, he emphasized the idea that ultimate reality must be changeless; accordingly our ordinary world of experience cannot be ultimate reality. But like Heraclitus, Plato also appreciated the importance of apparent change, and the need for some underlying *logos* or ultimate principle, to make sense of it all. Plato’s Forms are his version of the *logos*.

An example of a Form is this: Suppose you draw a triangle on this piece of paper and attempt to prove a theorem of Euclidean geometry about triangles. Now the first thing to notice is that this particular triangle, as you have drawn it, is not even close to being an accurate triangle; but even if you used the most precise instruments in the world, it would still not have exactly straight sides, the lines would still have some thickness (which a true line does not have), and the

angles would be slightly in error. In other words, *it is impossible to draw a true triangle*. Second, even if the triangle were much better drawn, how is it possible that by proving something about *this* triangle you have thereby proven something about *all* triangles? Plato's answer is: Because, what you are really dealing with here is not this triangle at all, which is only a poor material example. You are really dealing with the Form *triangle*, an immaterial perfect triangle that does not exist anywhere in this material world.

Where does the Form *triangle* exist? Today most people would say, "In our minds" or "It doesn't." But Plato thought that it does exist. Indeed, his whole philosophy is based on the view that there are *two worlds*, this world of ordinary material existence, in which we spend most of our time and energy, and another world, a world of pure Forms, which is eternal, immaterial, and more real than this one. The first world consists of material things that change, die, and disappear; Plato called it the **World of Becoming**. It is not *unreal*, but it is *less real* than the other world, the truly real world, which he called the **World of Being**. In his book *The Republic*, Plato gives us a dramatic account of the relationship between these two worlds in terms of a myth, "the myth of the cave." The cave represents the world of shadows, the World of Becoming, in which we all live. The sunlight represents the truth, the World of Being, which we can know only through *reason*, not through experience.



### The Myth of the Cave (excerpt)

**SOCRATES:** *Imagine men to be living in an underground cavelike dwelling place, which has a way up to the light along its whole width, but the entrance is a long way up. The men have been there from childhood, with their neck and legs in fetters, so that they remain in the same place and can only see ahead of them, as their bonds prevent them turning their heads. Light is provided by a fire burning some way behind them, and on a higher ground, there is a path across the cave and along this a low wall has been built, like the screen at a puppet show in front of the performers who show their puppets above it. . . . See then also men carrying along that wall, so that they overtop it, all kinds of artifacts, statues of men, reproductions of other animals in stone or wood fashioned in all sorts of ways, and, as is likely, some of the carriers are talking while others are silent. . . . Altogether then . . . such men would believe the truth to be nothing else than the shadows of the artifacts?*

(continues)

### The Myth of the Cave (excerpt) (*continued*)

**GLAUCON:** *They must believe that.*

**SOCRATES:** *Consider then what deliverance from their bonds and the curing of their ignorance would be if something like this naturally happened to them. Whenever one of them was freed, had to stand up suddenly, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, doing all that would give him pain, the flash of the fire would make it impossible for him to see the objects of which he had earlier seen the shadows. What do you think he would say if he was told that what he saw was foolishness, that he was now somewhat closer to reality and turned to things that existed more fully, that he saw more correctly? . . . And if one were to drag him thence by force up the rough and steep path, and did not let him go before he was dragged into the sunlight, would he not be in physical pain and angry as he was dragged along? When he came into the light, with the sunlight filling his eyes, he would not be able to see a single one of the things which are now said to be*

**GLAUCON:** *Not at once, certainly.*

**SOCRATES:** *I think he would need time to get adjusted before he could see things in the world above. . . . Then, at last, he would be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or in some alien place, but the sun itself in its own place, and be able to contemplate it . . . After this he would reflect that it is the sun which provides the seasons and the years, which governs everything in the visible world, and is also in some way the cause of those other things which he used to see.*

From Plato. *The Republic*. Bk. VII. Trans. G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis, Hackett: 1974.

In Plato's view, people who devote all their attention to things in the physical world—the world we experience through our senses—are like people who spend their entire lives watching television. They deal only with images, never with the reality that lies behind those images. To come to know this reality is the work of the intellect and the ultimate task of philosophy.

Now you can see how Plato has saved both sides of his predecessors' philosophical views: he has the Heraclitean notion of constant change but also his *logos*, which lies in the Forms; he has Parmenides's spectacular claim that the things of our ordinary experience are not truly real; and he has Pythagoras's view that the most real things are eternal patterns and principles, such as those of mathematics. Now notice what Plato has done: he has taken the parts of all those views he agrees with, and he has integrated them into a single dramatic and compelling picture of the way they fit together in a single worldview. Lesser philosophers might

have said, “Well, I believe in material things, of course; I also believe in numbers, and in some eternal principle underlying them.” But Plato has worked out a view in which all of this *ties together*. The views themselves, as you have seen, are not particularly original. But almost everyone would agree that Plato is one of the greatest philosophers not only of Greece but of all times, and the reason is the brilliance and imagination with which he has put his views together.

## Aristotle's *Metaphysics*



It is at this point in our history that Aristotle (see p. 12) enters the scene. Aristotle, who was Plato's student, found Plato's two-world view implausible. Aristotle was a far more commonsense thinker, who insisted that reality has to be the everyday world of things, trees, and people, not some other world that we never actually experience. So in effect he brought Plato back down to earth; he rejected Plato's World of Being and the Forms and insisted, along with what philosophers usually call the “ordinary person” (in other words, all of us as nonspecialists when we are thinking about philosophy), that this world is the real world and there is no other.

However, although Aristotle insisted that our everyday reality is reality, he did not therefore reject the all-important distinction between reality and appearances that had been developing over several centuries. But whereas Plato separated them into two different worlds, Aristotle instead said that the *forms* of things are in the things themselves and have no separate existence. (Let's use the lowercase letter *f* to show that there is nothing “otherworldly” here.) And in Aristotle, the ultimately real things—to which he gave the very important name **substances**—are nothing other than particular things in the world—horses, flowers, people, rocks, and so on.

The distinction between reality and appearances stays intact, however, for it is not always true that we understand the essential nature, or what Aristotle called “the essence,” of these individual substances. For example, just because we are all familiar with people-substances (that is, people), we don't necessarily understand what it is to be human, what it is to be a person. And, to take a far more dramatic example, just because we are familiar with our small part of the universe in everyday life, it does not follow that we understand the universe as a whole. Indeed, Aristotle's picture of the universe is arguably even more dramatic than Plato's; he envisioned the universe as a gigantic organism, growing and restless, seeking knowledge of itself.

The conflict between their starting points, between Plato's view that reality is something other than our everyday world and Aristotle's view that the ultimate realities are the substances of our daily life, is one that has continued in philosophy until the present day. (In fact, both views became models for Christian thinkers. Plato's view of another, immaterial and eternal world, different from the material world of daily life, became the central thesis of Saint Augustine's philosophy and the main doctrine of Christian theology for centuries to come. Aristotle's view of a living, growing, goal-directed universe played an important

role in the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and it is still an important part of Christian theology.)

We can now say quite clearly what we are trying to do. Philosophy—and metaphysics in particular—is an *interpretation of the world*. It is our attempt to make sense of it, our attempt to explain it. Some of our efforts will be directed toward specific issues—for example, what things can we properly consider real? Or, when are a person’s actions to be considered as free and as his or her own responsibility? Some of our efforts will be aimed at the whole picture, and we’ll ask such questions as “What is the origin of the universe?” and “Why is there a universe at all?” One way to answer such questions is by the pre-Socratic technique: pick out an essential element or set of elements and show how the world can be explained in terms of the chosen element(s). Another way is the Platonic approach: postulate and design a world “behind” this one, which explains why things are the way they are. A third way is the Aristotelian way: assume the commonsense world but then show that there is much in it that we do not yet understand and that the whole picture cannot be grasped from the details of life alone.

The choice largely depends on your views; the pre-Socratic way is initially attractive for its simplicity, but you will find that there is much that cannot be easily accounted for with a single element or set of elements. The Platonic and Aristotelian pictures are much more difficult, but it is for good reason that many philosophers consider virtually all philosophy done in the past 2,500 years to be modeled after Plato, after Aristotle, or after both. Between Plato’s imaginative synthesis of the variety of views before him and Aristotle’s hardheaded analysis of individual things and their properties, our concept of reality has continued to be formed and re-formed, from generation to generation, and whatever we decide to say about such matters, we can be certain that one or both of them had already anticipated it.

## Mind and Metaphysics



*Consider this table in front of us, which has hitherto roused but the slightest thought in us. It is full of surprising possibilities. The one thing we know is that it is not what it seems. Beyond this modest result, we have the most complete liberty of conjecture. Leibniz tells us it is a community of souls; Bishop Berkeley tells us it is an idea in the mind of God; sober science, scarcely less wonderful, tells us it is a vast collection of electric charges in violent motion.*

—Bertrand Russell, 1912

You may have noticed that one familiar answer to our question of what is real has not been raised. That is the idea that, ultimately, *mind* or **consciousness** is real. Today most of us would insist that mind be at least part of the answer, and some people—called **idealists**—would insist that it be the whole answer. An idealist believes that the basis of the existence of all things is the mind (whether our own minds or the mind of God). We realize that we know of the existence of material

things only through their effects on our minds. Numbers exist because we think them, according to idealists. Beethoven's music exists because we can hear it when it is played, hum it to ourselves, read it from the score if we have had some musical training. According to an idealist, such things are real *only* insofar as they are experienced in the mind; in other words, it is mind that is most real, and other entities are dependent on mind or minds. Why did none of the Greeks mention this? The fact is they had no such concept of something being "in the mind" but not in the external world; the idea would never have occurred to them. This, more than anything else, marks the greatest single difference between their metaphysics and most of ours.

Even if you don't accept the idealists' view that the ultimately real entities are minds, it is still hard to deny the claim that minds are part of reality (although materialism is still alive and well in many quarters, and there are many philosophers and scientists who hope to be able to explain the existence of minds in strictly physical and physiological terms). Others, however, believe minds to have their own kind of existence. Three different views of minds and their place in reality have dominated Western thinking for the past several hundred years. All three begin with the idea that mind is a substance (or an aspect of a substance), which is precisely the concept that the Greeks did not have. But in one view, minds are but one *kind* of substance; in another view, minds are but *part* of a substance; and in yet another view, minds are the *only* substances. These three views were represented by three European philosophers from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the French philosopher René Descartes, the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, and the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz.

## René Descartes

René Descartes (see p. 28) was a **pluralist**, in the sense of being a philosopher who believes in more than one substance. ("Pluralism" can have other meanings, too; for example, it can refer to someone who is tolerant of various methodological approaches within philosophy.) Descartes is usually referred to as a **dualist** because he accepts two basic substances—mind and body—but in fact he thought there were three kinds of substances: physical bodies, minds, and God. God created the other two substances, and except by God, they could be neither created nor destroyed.

The overriding problem of Descartes's metaphysics was how to connect the various substances—in particular, mind and body. It is obvious that each of us is, in some sense, a complex of both mind and body, mental and physical properties and therefore mental and physical substance. But if substances are by definition ultimate and totally independent of anything else, then how can they possibly interact? How is it possible for events happening to your body (a nail in your foot, for instance) to produce an effect in your mind (pain)? How is it possible for events in your mind (drive to the grocery store, for instance) to have an effect on your body (you walk to your car, put the key in the ignition, and start the engine)?

One suggestion might be that the two substances infiltrate one another, as copper and zinc combine (but don't chemically interact) to form brass. Descartes sometimes suggested this. But the interaction between mind and body still seems to go unexplained. In fact, it gets even more complicated when we see that Descartes defined mental substance as that which is not in space (or **unextended** as opposed to physical things, which are **extended** in space). Once we have defined mind and body as two different substances, there seems to be no way of getting them together. And this is even before we begin asking how God as a separate substance can interact with the substances he has created.

Descartes never solved the problem of how substances interact. To solve the problem, there seem to be only two solutions: Either (1) mind and body are not separate substances but parts of the same substance, or (2) they are separate substances, all right, but they don't interact after all. Spinoza would choose the first way; Leibniz chose the second. (We talk about this mind-body problem in Chapter 6.)

There are two important points to make about all of this right away. First, don't think that what we are debating are just the complexities of a technical word (that is, *substance*). The word is merely a convenient way of referring to what is ultimate reality—whatever you think that might be—and the debate between Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz is about the nature of reality, not about a word. Second, don't think that these debates about reality are not connected to the more urgent questions about the meaning of life and belief in God: these debates about the nature of reality and substance are in fact attempts to answer just those questions, different ways of conceiving of God and his relation to us, and different ways of conceiving of ourselves.

### A Question of Substance

	<b>Descartes</b>	<b>Spinoza</b>	<b>Leibniz</b>
Nature of substance(s)	Mind, body, and God	The Universe (God)	Monads (minds)
Number of substances	Three types: many minds, many bodies, one God	One	Indefinitely many, plus God (the supermonad)
Interaction between substances	Causal interaction	Substances do not interact. Mind and body are two of the many attributes of the one substance.	Substances do not interact. Monads only appear to interact, orchestrated by God.

## Baruch Spinoza

Baruch Spinoza (see pp. 77–78) saw that Descartes, having defined mind and body as separate substances, could not explain how they interact. Very well then, he said, the solution to this problem is that they are not separate substances, but different aspects—or what he called **attributes**—of one and the same substance. Furthermore, if God is a substance separate from the substance of which mind and body are attributes, then God cannot interact with the world, which is nonsense. Therefore, Spinoza concluded, God must be that same substance and, in fact, “God” is just another name for that substance. Indeed, the starting point of Spinoza’s whole argument is that, because substance is ultimate and totally independent, and because substances cannot interact, there can be only *one* substance. A philosopher such as Spinoza who believes in one substance is a **monist**.

### Spinoza’s Metaphysics, From *Ethics*

Spinoza presented his metaphysical system in the style of Euclid’s geometry, with definitions, axioms, and a sequence of “propositions” (theorems) that he proved one at a time. Here are some sample definitions, axioms, propositions, and proofs.

#### Definitions

- I. By that which is self-caused, I mean that of which the essence involves existence, or that of which the nature is only conceivable as existent.*
- II. A thing is called finite after its kind, when it can be limited by another thing of the same nature; for instance, a body is called finite because we can always conceive another greater body. So, also, a thought is limited by another thought, but a body is not limited by thought, nor a thought by body.*
- III. By substance, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself: in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception.*
- IV. By attribute, I mean that which the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of substance.*
- V. By mode, I mean the modifications of substance, or that which exists in, and is conceived through, something other than itself.*
- VI. By God, I mean a being absolutely infinite—that is, a substance consisting in infinite attributes, in which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality.*

(continues)

## Spinoza's Metaphysics, From *Ethics* (continued)

### Axioms

- I. Everything which exists, exists either in itself or in something else.*
- II. That which cannot be conceived through anything else must be conceived through itself.*
- III. From a given definite cause an effect necessarily follows; and, on the other hand, if no definite cause be granted, it is impossible that an effect can follow.*
- IV. The knowledge of an effect depends on and involves the knowledge of a cause.*
- V. Things which have nothing in common cannot be understood, the one by means of the other; the conception of one does not involve the conception of the other.*
- VI. A true idea must correspond with its ideate or object.*
- VII. If a thing can be conceived as nonexistent, its essence does not involve existence.*

### Propositions

*Prop. I.* Substance is by nature prior to its modifications . . . .

*Prop. II.* Two substances, whose attributes are different, have nothing in common.

*Proof.*— . . . *evident from Def. III. For each must exist in itself, and be conceived through itself; in other words, the conception of one does not imply the conception of the other.*

*Prop. III.* Things which have nothing in common cannot be one the cause of the other.

*Proof.*—*If they have nothing in common, it follows that one cannot be apprehended by means of the other (Ax. V.), and, therefore, one cannot be the cause of the other (Ax. IV.). Q.E.D.* [Latin, *quod erat demonstrandum*, a phrase used in traditional logic meaning “which was to be demonstrated.”]

*Prop. IV.* Two or more distinct things are distinguished one from the other either by the difference of the attributes of the substances, or by the difference of their modifications. . . .

*Prop. V.* There cannot exist in the universe two or more substances having the same nature or attribute.

*Prop. VI.* One substance cannot be produced by another substance . . . .

From Spinoza, Baruch. “Ethics.” *The Rationalists*. Trans. R. H. M. Elwes  
New York: Doubleday, 1960.

In Chapter 3, we pointed out that Spinoza was a pantheist because he believed that God and God's universe were identical. Now we can see why that must be so. But Spinoza's metaphysical view has other dramatic results as well: because mind and body are attributes of the one substance, our everyday division between ourselves as individuals is arbitrary and ultimately unreal. We are in fact all "one" (as some Asian mystics have long taught, too). Individuality is an illusion. So, too, is what we call "freedom." Because we are all an integral part of the one substance, we are wholly *determined* in our thoughts and our behavior by what goes on in the rest of the one substance. (We will consider the issue of freedom and determinism in Chapter 7.) So Spinoza's philosophy, which turns on the concept of substance, ultimately presents us with a picture of reality very different from our everyday views; it is a reality in which we are all a unity, in which individuality doesn't count and in which free choice is an illusion. It is a reality in which we are identical to (or part of) God and should not take ourselves as individuals at all seriously.

### Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz

**Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz**, on the other hand, agreed with Descartes that there is a plurality of substances—that is, more than one. But Leibniz also agreed with Spinoza that substances cannot interact. Therefore, Leibniz postulated a world in which there are many substances, all of them created by God. These substances are all immaterial, and Leibniz called them **monads**. (God, too, is a monad, but something of a supermonad.) Monads, as substances, do not interact. How then, does it *seem* as if the world is composed of interacting substances?

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**Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz** (1646–1716), who has been called “the last of the universal geniuses,” grew up in Leipzig and traveled frequently. A philosopher of the highest caliber, Leibniz also was one of the inventors of the calculus, the father of modern formal linguistics, the inventor of a primitive computer, a military strategist, and a physicist who, in his own time, was the main rival of **Newton**.

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Leibniz, like Spinoza, used his metaphysics as a basis for an imaginative and unusual view of the world. But where Spinoza believed that all things are a unity and that there is no individuality, Leibniz was very much an individualist, and it is for that reason that his pluralism of monads is so important to him. For Leibniz it was also important that God is not simply identical to the universe, but separate from it and watching over it, guaranteeing that this is “the best of all possible worlds” (see pp. 86 and 399). Spinoza saw the world as wholly determined and without freedom; Leibniz thought that what is most important—and what in fact defines each monad—is its individuality and spontaneity. To prove this, he developed the following view of reality.

### An Introduction to Monads: Leibniz

1. *The Monad, of which we will speak here, is nothing else than a simple substance, which goes to make up composites; by simple we mean without parts.*
2. *There must be simple substances because there are composites; for a composite is nothing else than a collection or aggregatum of simple substances. . . .*
8. *Still Monads must have some qualities, otherwise they would not even be existences. And if simple substances did not differ at all in their qualities, there would be no means of perceiving any change in things. Whatever is in a composite can come into it only through its simple elements and the Monads, if they were without qualities, since they do not differ at all in quantity, would be indistinguishable one from another. For instance, if we imagine a plenum or completely filled space, where each part receives only the equivalent of its own previous motion, one state of things would not be distinguishable from another.*
9. *Each Monad, indeed, must be different from every other. For there are never in nature two beings which are exactly alike, and in which it is not possible to find a difference either internal or based on an intrinsic property.*

—*Monadology*, 1714

Each monad is something like an individual mind. There are no physical substances as such, only appearances of them. Moreover, the monads don't interact; they only appear to do so. Imagine yourself in a room, not merely surrounded by television screens but by the most sophisticated equipment of virtual reality. Television offers visual experiences that are limited to two dimensions and audio experiences that are limited by the placement and range of the speaker system. But a virtual-reality room, such as the holodeck in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, provides holistic experiences. You can travel to distant lands, test your ability to be a good parent, or even indulge in a sexual fantasy that you would never consider in "actual" reality. The equipment does not intrude itself: you see no wires, tubes, or boxes, and you can sense no difference between the apparent world and the real world. On the holodeck, you experience the world or, rather, images of the world, and each of us—each in our own little rooms—experiences on the holodeck our own perspective on the world. God has programmed all of us to have the right perspective and the right images so that it seems as if we are all looking at the same world and at each other, but in reality we are not. Like all other monads, we never actually see each other, and there is no world as such. There are only our individual perceptions, within our individual monads, created and cared for by God in a "preestablished harmony."

## Idealism



**Idealism** is the philosophy that says that what is real is mind, that all else—material objects, numbers, ideas—are in the mind or in some essential sense dependent on minds for their existence.

Descartes himself was not an idealist, but he established the framework for most later idealists when he said, in his *Meditations*, that one's own ideas are the only things one can know directly. From that, it is a short but spectacular leap to the claim that only ideas are real. Leibniz, for example, was an idealist; he said that physical reality is nothing but “perceptions” within immaterial monads—including the mind of God. According to idealism, however, there is nothing beyond us, except perhaps God (who is immaterial). The universe is made up of minds and of things dependent on minds, and nothing else.

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**Bishop George Berkeley** (1685–1753) was a brilliant Irish philosopher-theologian who is still the leading representative of subjective idealism, the view that nothing exists except ideas and minds. When we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own ideas. “To be is to be perceived,” Berkeley argued. All objects exist only in the mind (including the mind of God). Late in life, Berkeley became an educational missionary, visiting early America. Berkeley, California, is named after him.

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Another early-eighteenth-century idealist was the Irish bishop **George Berkeley** 1685–1753. Berkeley held the extreme position of **subjective idealism**, which, simply summarized, insisted that “to be is to be perceived” (*esse est percipi*). According to Berkeley, it makes no sense to believe in the existence of anything that we cannot experience. (We will consider the underlying view, called empiricism, in Chapter 5.) But all that we can experience, Berkeley argues, are our own ideas. We know that a stone exists because we have ideas (experiences) about it, ideas of the visual appearance, touch, and weight of the stone, as well as of the sound it makes when we scrape it, the pain it causes when we kick it, its visible effects on other things (which are also nothing but ideas in our minds). We know that our minds exist, Berkeley argues, because ideas depend on minds. And we can know that God exists (as an infinite Mind) because, Berkeley argues, our finite minds require God's infinite Mind as a “presupposition.” In other words, our minds don't arise on their own and they didn't exist from eternity; they depend for their existence, we must suppose, on something whose existence is eternal and dependent on nothing else, namely, the immaterial mind of God. (God is entirely spiritual, and thus an infinite mind.) Beyond that there is nothing else. No material objects. No world outside of our (and God's) knowledge and ideas.

This may sound counterintuitive. What could be more obvious than the existence of material things? We encounter material things all the time. But what is it to say that we encounter a thing? According to Berkeley, it is that we have an experience of it, which is to say, it is a mental phenomenon, an idea in our minds. But don't we experience a *material* object? No, says Berkeley. We only experience the thing's "properties," its characteristics. In the case of a rock, for example, we experience its properties of hardness, durability, weight, dimensions, shape, color, and so forth. These properties are all ideas, which are joined together with our idea of the rock. In the thing, these properties all appear together; but we can separate them as ideas.

What we never really experience is the rock's matter. "Matter" is just an abstract concept that we've imposed on what we experience. In the case of the rock, we postulate some substance, which we call its matter, to which these various properties are attached. "Substance" is our idea of what holds the properties all together in the rock. But this is to say that matter itself is only an idea. So-called material objects are ideas through and through.

Idealism in such extreme forms may sound far-fetched and hard to believe, but it is important to emphasize that such positions are not argued lightly. They are based on careful consideration and a large number of sound, hard-hitting arguments. Idealism can be argued, for example, from the seemingly undeniable premise that the only things we can know are based on experience and that nothing other than experience—for example, material objects existing "outside of us" in the world—can be known. Or, idealism might be argued from the nature of God and his works; if God is infinite Mind, then his creations will be thoughts. Or, idealism might be argued from Platonic considerations about the formal properties of things (such as the angles in a triangle. A thing is triangular-shaped because we recognize the form of triangularity in it, for example—but this is to say that we recognize an idea.) But, in any case, idealism is not just the frenzied assertion of a mad person—"Nothing exists but my mind!" It is a philosophical position of long standing for the very reason that it is based on arguments that many people have found convincing. If idealism seems to contradict common sense, it is nevertheless advanced—by Berkeley, for example—as nothing other than a more adequate account of commonsense experience. The idealist still believes in the reality of rocks and the blueness of the sky. But idealism is an attempt to reason about what these must *really* be like, if we are to know them at all.

### Three German Idealists

**Immanuel Kant** (1724–1804)

**Arthur Schopenhauer** (1788–1860)

**Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** (1770–1831)

The emphasis on argument in the defense of metaphysics cannot be underestimated. Indeed, much of the history of metaphysics since Plato has been based on the idea that reality is ultimately to be discovered not by the senses but by reason—through that abstract and perhaps “godlike” ability we possess to figure things out despite the bewildering confusion of appearances. But idealism has another source of inspiration, too. Many idealists are also devout theists. Both Berkeley and Leibniz invoke God in their idealism as the all-knowing Mind. One reason for this connection between their idealism and belief in God is the necessity of having an all-knowing Mind to perceive things when we do not. But God is not, in these idealists’ views, just a corollary to epistemology (that is, the theory of knowledge and how we can “know” something). They are also devout believers, and idealism suits their religious sensibilities as well as their epistemological theories. Idealism, in general, is a combination of vision and rigorous argument. Like most metaphysical theories, it is a worldview, in German, a *Weltanschauung*, which is supported and structured by careful and often ingenious arguments about why the world *must really be that way*.

Perhaps the most spectacular forms of idealism were developed in the nineteenth century in Germany, by a diverse group of philosophers known, appropriately, as **German Idealists**. The founder and unchallenged leader of this group was the great East Prussian philosopher **Immanuel Kant**. Kant, like Berkeley, begins with the epistemological premise that everything we know must be based on experience, but he takes this easily agreed-on premise to astounding lengths. The world, he argues, is essentially *constituted* (*set up*, as in the word *constitution*) by us, through categories that our minds impose on them. There is no space, no time, and there are no objects apart from our experience of them.

However, the nature of objects is not up to our own individual fancy. Our minds are constructed in such a way that there are certain universal and necessary principles that ensure that space *must* be a certain way for us, and as a consequence, time and objects must be a certain way, too. The formatting that our mind applies to things might be compared to the formatting that is necessary for a computer to “read” a disc, except that our minds impose the formatting themselves. If our minds did not automatically structure the input in accordance with this basic formatting, we would be unable to make sense of it. What Kant argues, in summary, is that there is a way the world must be, but it is a necessity based on the nature of our minds, not on the world itself. We *impose* laws on nature; we do not, like scientists, merely find them.

Kant’s radical and exhilarating vision of the world gets coupled in Kant with another, even more dramatic, idealist vision. We live, he says, not just in one world, but in two. When we are concerned with knowledge—for example, while studying science or just checking out what buildings are down the street—we perceive the world through the concepts of our understanding, constituted according to certain rules. But when we are involved in practical matters, for example, or matters of religious belief, those concepts and rules no longer apply. Instead, we use a completely different set of rules. For example, a physician or a physiologist can explain what we do in terms of nerves and muscles, bones and movements. That gives us knowledge. But when we *act* and actually *do*

### Three Worldviews

**Kant**—Two worlds (“standpoints”) are equally “real” and rational.

**The World of Nature  
(which we perceive)**

Physical objects  
Cause and effect  
Self as object of knowledge  
Science, technology  
Facts to be known

**The World of Action,  
Morals, Faith**

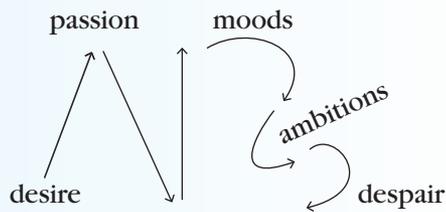
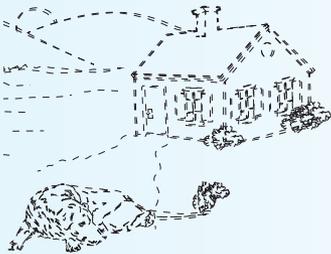
Rational principles (morality)  
Freedom to choose  
Self as agent  
God, immortal soul, faith  
Duty to be done

*DUTY TO BE DONE:*

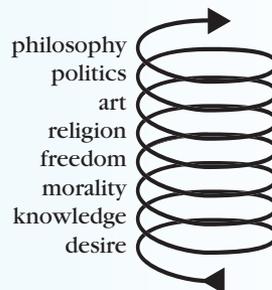


**Schopenhauer**—The world is illusion; only Will is real (but irrational).

Representations *Will* (irrational, without purpose)



**Hegel**—The unity of the world and the mind is Spirit, discovering itself.



something, we don't see our bodies in terms of nerves and muscles; our bodies are simply the means by which we carry out our *intentions*, obey certain *principles*, achieve certain *ends*. So, too, when we think about God, we are not thinking of a Being who can be known through the concepts of scientific knowledge; and we already saw (in Chapter 3) that Kant instead defends a *moral* conception of God's necessary existence. Kant once said that he saw his mission in life as being to "limit knowledge to make room for faith." By dividing his idealism into two separate but equal realms, Kant succeeds in giving us a picture of reality in which science and religion are no longer at odds with one another.

After Kant, a considerable number of young German philosophers followed his lead and became idealists, too. Some preserved his "two world" vision; others rejected it. **Arthur Schopenhauer** considered himself a dedicated student of Kant, but where Kant tended to perceive the world with hope and considerable respect for humanity, Schopenhauer was a self-proclaimed pessimist. He didn't think much of people, and he didn't think much of life. His idealism, accordingly, spelled out his pessimism. But it was also based on a long train of sometimes brilliant arguments, some of them in defense of Kant's idealism, others pointing out where he thought Kant had gone wrong.

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**Arthur Schopenhauer** (1788–1860) was possibly the crankiest philosopher in the history of Western thought. He was, perhaps ironically, an extremely willful person. He heaped scorn on most of his contemporaries, purposely announced his lectures at the same time as Hegel's at the University of Berlin in order to steal his students (an unsuccessful effort), and got involved in a lawsuit by knocking his landlady down the stairs. His philosophy, not surprisingly, takes the form of **pessimism**, the view that life in general is no good and has no purpose. Aptly, too, the central concept in his philosophy is "will." Yet he defended an ambitious system, modeled after Kant's, in which "will" is the driving force of everything in nature and, indeed, of reality itself. Despite his pessimism, Schopenhauer himself had a taste for good living, living very well until the age of seventy-two.

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Kant divides metaphysics into two worlds—one of nature and knowledge, and one of action, morals, and faith. But both worlds are, in Kant's vision, *rational*. They operate according to necessary laws. Schopenhauer, by contrast, says in effect that both sides of this metaphysical dualism are *irrational*, a fitting conclusion for his pessimism. The world of knowledge is in fact a world of *illusion*, he claims. What is real is inside of us, our willful aspect with its desires and other passions, driving us to act. But where Kant, too, believed in the reality of an inner force, which he called the **Will**, this Will was, Kant believed, rational and obeyed the rules of reason. Schopenhauer disagreed. The Will, he said, is irrational. It was not "ours"; instead, it is a violent force operating through us, creating desires and passions and provoking us to act but, ultimately, to no purpose at all.

Schopenhauer's answer to this tragic vision of human life is escape from being driven by the Will—through either aesthetic detachment (the quiet enjoyment of art, literature, and music—unfortunately a temporary respite) or ascetic renunciation (the rejection of desire that characterizes many saints and mystics).

Kant employed an idealist metaphysics to envision the world as rational and to separate science and religion, because he was devoted to both of them. Schopenhauer used idealist metaphysics to portray his gloomy view of the world, in which both science and human passions were pointless. A third German idealist, G. W. F. Hegel (whom we met in the Preface and considered again in Chapter 3), used idealism once again to establish a picture of the world as rational and to reconcile his interests in science and religion and to establish a picture of the world as rational. But where Kant's idealism was largely static, a vision of two realms of human life each ruled by a priori principles, Hegel envisioned a single cosmos with constant internal conflict within which an all-embracing Spirit develops itself through all of us and throughout history. As Spirit, the world is a kind of cosmic consciousness, a universal mind, trying to understand itself. (Hegel borrowed heavily from Aristotle here.) For Hegel, the spheres of science, moral activity, and religion are all ways in which Spirit moved toward self-understanding. Hegel developed this vision through many arguments, some of them defending the general idealist position, some of them attacking the other idealists and saying why his particular vision was preferable to theirs. Whatever the particular version, idealism always remains an exciting mixture of basic visions and hopes for the world, coupled with hardheaded arguments about why this particular vision is the right one. Whatever else it may be, idealism is the view that our ideas define our world, and that the most essential thing in the world is—the mind.

## Teleology



Hegel's view of the universal Spirit developing through history is a dramatic illustration of another ancient but still modern orientation premised on what we call **teleology** (from the Greek word for “purpose,” *telos*). A teleological view of the world is one that thinks the world has an ultimate goal, a purpose, toward which it continually develops. In ancient times, Aristotle defended a teleological vision of the universe struggling to recognize itself—“thought thinking itself,” he called it. So, too, Hegel's vision was universal Spirit struggling through human history to know itself as Spirit.

Modern science tends to discourage such thinking in terms of ultimate aims, urging instead explanations in terms of prior causes, which Aristotle calls “efficient causes”—that is, causes that bring something about. (Aristotle considered teleological goals to be causes, too, in that they helped to determine a course of events or behavior. He called these goals “final causes.”) Indeed, since the seventeenth century we have been taught to think of the universe as something of a giant machine, a mechanism that operates according to the causal laws of nature. But this vision of the universe as a machine has always seemed incomplete to a great many thinkers, including even those at the forefront of its formulation. Both Descartes and

### The Mutual Necessity of Truth and Falsity

*The more conventional opinion gets fixated on the antithesis of truth and falsity, the more it tends to expect a given philosophical system to be either accepted or contradicted; and hence it finds only acceptance or rejection. It does not comprehend the diversity of philosophical systems as the progressive unfolding of truth, but rather sees in it simple disagreements. The bud disappears in the bursting forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted in the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead. These forms are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole.*

—G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1807

From: Trans. A. V. Miller.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

the great physicist Sir Isaac Newton, for example, defended a mechanistic, causal account of the universe, but also insisted that God provided purpose to his creation. So, too, Kant—who was an enthusiastic devotee of Newton—supplemented his causal view of the natural world with a teleological vision of the cosmos, and Leibniz taught that all monads unfolded according to God’s purpose.

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English-born **Alfred North Whitehead** (1861–1947) coauthored *Principia Mathematica* with **Bertrand Russell** before emigrating to the United States, where he developed his process theory.

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The idea of the universe as a great machine is relatively new in history, but teleology is almost as old as Western civilization itself. The ancient Greeks were mostly **animists**—that is, they attributed some sort of lifelike activity to all things. Aristotle’s teleological metaphysics was just a very sophisticated expression of this, a theory of the purpose of nature as well as of purposes in nature. So, too, Native Americans have long believed in a vision of the universe that is not mechanical (or “dead”) but very much alive. Many Asian and African religions and philosophies also hold animistic and teleological views of the world, in contrast to our more mechanical, “scientific” models.

In contemporary times, such process philosophers as **Charles Hartshorne** and **Alfred North Whitehead** defend a teleological view of reality as **process** in place of the more static concept of substance, once again synthesizing science and teleological metaphysics. Whether or not the purpose of the universe is God's purpose, or the purpose of some other sort of Spirit or spirits, the idea that the universe *means* something and is itself striving for some sort of completion has always been an exhilarating philosophical view. In contemporary ecological context, many people employ the Greek term *gaia* to refer to a contemporary concept of the earth itself as a living organism, which they call the Gaia Theory.

### A Theological “Mistake”: Hartshorne

God Is Absolutely Perfect and Therefore Unchangeable. *In Plato's Republic one finds the proposition: God, being perfect, cannot change (not for the better, since “perfect” means that there can be no better; not for the worse, since ability to change for the worse, to decay, degenerate, or become corrupt, is a weakness, an imperfection). The argument may seem cogent, but it is so only if two assumptions are valid: that it is possible to conceive of a meaning for “perfect” that excludes change in any and every respect and that we must conceive God as perfect in just this sense. Obviously the ordinary meanings of perfect do not entirely exclude change. Thus Wordsworth wrote of his wife that she was a “perfect woman,” but he certainly did not mean that she was totally unchangeable. In many places in the Bible human beings are spoken of as perfect; again the entire exclusion of change cannot have been intended. Where in the Bible God is spoken of as perfect, the indications are that even here the exclusion of change in any and every respect was not implied.*

—Charles Hartshorne,  
*Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, 1984

By contrast, many people believe that the universe itself does *not* have a purpose, that it is simply “matter in motion” and not here for any particular reason. Indeed, it is in this vision of the purpose of the universe that our question about the meaning of life and our question about the ultimate nature of reality come together as a single problem. Does the universe have a purpose? Is this purpose provided by God? If so, what is it? And if the universe as a whole has no purpose, does human life have a purpose? Those are the ultimate questions that we all must ask ourselves at one time or another, for our various answers to them are with us all the time anyway. How we live and what we do, what we can hope for, and even our day-to-day attitudes toward our jobs, ourselves, and each other, ultimately fall within the framework of these ultimate metaphysical questions, and are accordingly affected by them.

But if the word *reality* is an evaluative term for what we consider most basic to our experience, as we suggested earlier, does reality have to be primarily scientific or religious? Suppose we give up the age-old presupposition that what is real must itself be most durable and eternal. Suppose, for example, one were to propose—as Hegel suggested—that what is most real is neither the world discovered by science nor the world believed in by religion but our *social* world, and that the primary structures of reality are not atoms or electrons or gods and other spirits but other people, tied together in bonds of kinship and community. Knowledge, in this interpretation of reality, becomes those views that are commonly shared and considered provable to anyone—or “objective”; religious belief consists of those doctrines and rituals held in common, which help hold the community together. Or suppose someone else were to say that *passion* is most real, that reality is what you feel when you’re in love or extremely angry and everything else is but a pale shadow of this. Reality, in these views, is a function of *our* purposes, our passions, and our collective social goals.

The possibilities for metaphysics are more expansive than traditional Western philosophy has tended to suggest. It is a very real question, in other words, whether science and religion have been traditionally overemphasized in our view of ourselves. Are they really what’s so important? What about *morality*? As we close this chapter we should open up the concept of “reality” to encompass further dimensions. Perhaps the stuff of the real world is none of the entities we have been talking about, but rather it is other people, or art, or music, or whatever—as Paul Tillich said of God—that is our “ultimate concern.” The question of reality thus turns into the question of the meaning of life, which for some people may be answered in terms of God, for others in terms of science, but for many of us, once we start really to think about it, the answer might lie in an entirely different, perhaps even unexpected, place.

## Metaphysics and the Everyday World



Philosophers frame our everyday experience in a larger vision so that their views about life and its meaning can be used to understand our ordinary experience in a different way. For Spinoza, for example, philosophy was a source of great consolation; it allowed him to see everything that happens as just another mechanical movement of the “One Substance,” over which he had no control and in which, in any case, he didn’t really matter. For Leibniz, on the other hand, philosophy was a source of optimism and confidence: he saw himself as an individual consciousness developing a view about the whole of the universe, assured from the outset that this view is programmed and guaranteed by God, who is watching over the whole process. These eminent writers were engaging in a great imaginative effort. To read them as if they were just solving some technical puzzles or, as some people complain, “just playing with words” is to misunderstand the way that they—and all of us—see the world. For we all need a vision, a conceptual framework, to give facts and things meaning and make our lives worthwhile. Spinoza and Leibniz were spelling out their vision of the world for themselves,

for us to share, or for us to react against. Their success as philosophers depends on whether we do in fact react at all and whether we try to rethink their visions in our own terms.

You might object that Plato's vision of two worlds or the cosmic visions of Spinoza and Leibniz are poetic metaphors rather than philosophy. The German metaphysical views we have briefly explored—Hegel's grand view of the Spirit developing itself through all of us and Schopenhauer's dramatic view of a Will in all of us, driving us through our passions for no reason whatever—do indeed seem more like the images of poets than the hardheaded philosophical systems. But great philosophy is almost always poetry as well as sharp thinking, vision as well as argument, imagination as well as intelligence.

From our examinations of Western philosophers' ontologies and metaphysics, you should be starting to recognize certain basic suppositions that are common to most of them. First, there is an underlying assumption in most Western metaphysical views that *what is ultimately real* is that which endures throughout change. A second basic assumption is that reality is somehow a unity. If you believe that there are different ultimate units, or substances (like Descartes) or different worlds (like Plato or Kant), it is necessary to show how they somehow fit together. Scientists, too, have always sought the most elegant theory, which would tie together the most material under the simplest principle, and the ultimate goal of science, from Thales to Newton to Einstein, has been what Einstein called a "unified field theory"—that is, a single theory that would sum up and integrate all the laws of nature. And in religion, too, it is no surprise that some of the most dominant religions in the world, and all of the major religions in the West, are monotheistic—believing in one God—because a single deity, like a single explanatory principle, is more powerful and more compelling than a collection of gods or principles fighting among themselves for domination. Again, this assumption can be challenged, but to do so is to oppose the whole intellectual history of the West, and perhaps to be left with a sense of two or more realities that do not tie together in any coherent way.

We reiterate these two assumptions, not because they are beyond question (nothing in philosophy is beyond question), but because it is important to be aware of how powerful they are. The whole history of Western philosophy, science, and theology has struggled toward eternity and unity, so if you try to defend some other view you'd better have some good arguments for doing so. Still, these assumptions have been attacked, and brilliantly, for example by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who rejected the whole metaphysics of eternity and unity and thus rejected (he thought) the whole of metaphysics as well. If you think reality is to be found in the details of life, however, or in passions, or fleeting desires, then you might well be forced to reject these time-honored assumptions. But you cannot simply dismiss them. (Nietzsche spent his whole career trying to challenge them.) And whatever you do in your philosophy, it is at least important to take account of them. Is it possible that the world in reality is fragmented through and through?

Is it possible that life is essentially conflict and antagonism—what philosophers following Hegel and Marx call *dialectic*? Is it possible that there is no single, coherent viewpoint that will make sense of our lives? Even these

are viewpoints to be defended, paradoxically, in a coherent, unified framework. Whatever else it is—visionary, speculative, inspiring—philosophy is also hard thinking, and imagination is its accomplice, not its substitute. Mutual tolerance of opinions is indeed a virtue, but not when it is lazy indifference or simply the insecurity that most of us have about defending our own ideas. When Socrates said that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” what he really meant was “know yourself and your ideas; and criticize your ideas in order to revise them and be confident of them.” What you think about reality isn’t just “your opinion”; it is also basic to the way you live, and the foundation of everything that you do. And a flimsy foundation is no more secure for being unexpressed, unexamined, and unargued.

## Closing Questions

1. Choose *one* of the elements defended by the pre-Socratic philosophers (water, fire, numbers, and so on) and argue for it as well as you can, preferably with a friend or a few friends who will try to prove you wrong. For example, if you choose *fire*, an immediate objection would be that fire could not possibly be the essential element in cold objects—a block of ice, for example. A reply might be that cold objects simply contain *much less* fire than hot things. You might also argue that not all fire manifests itself as flame, and soon, no doubt, you will find yourself moving into more modern-day talk about energy instead of fire as such. The point of the exercise is (1) to see how very much alive we can still make these ancient theories in our own terms and (2) to show how any theory, if it has even the slightest initial plausibility, can be defended, at least to some extent, if only you are clever enough to figure out how to answer the various objections presented to you and modify your theory to meet them.
2. Describe the Form of some ordinary objects around you, in accordance with Plato’s theory. How do you know whether an object is defined by one Form or another? What can you say about the Form of an ordinary object, in the fashion of Plato’s discussion of the Form of *triangle*? If an object changes, does it change Forms as well? Can an object have conflicting Forms? Can we understand our recognition of objects without some conception of Forms to explain how it is that we recognize them?
3. Categories in philosophy often seem too rigid or too simple-minded to classify the complexity of our views, but perhaps the following checklist will help you understand your own position in relation to the history of philosophy:
  - a. Are you a materialist? An immaterialist?

Do you believe that ultimate reality can be discovered by science?

Do you believe that ultimate reality is a matter of religious belief?

- b. What are the basic entities in your ontology? What is most real?
- c. Are you a monist? A pluralist?  
If you are a pluralist, what is the connection between the different entities in your ontology? Rank them in order of their relative reality, or explain their relationship.
- d. Are the basic entities in your ontology eternal? If not, how did they come into being?
- e. Are you an idealist? (Do you believe that the basic entities of your ontology are dependent on the existence of minds?)
- f. How do you explain the existence of (or how do you deny the existence of) the following: minds, numbers, God, tables and chairs, the law of gravity, evil, moral principles, dreams, Santa Claus?
- g. Does the universe have a purpose? Or one might ask, along with Martin Heidegger (see Chapter 6), “Why is there something rather than nothing?”
- h. What does the word *real* mean to you? Using your definition, run once again through the items in Opening Question 1 and rate them for their reality in your view.
- i. Do you think this world is the real world? Or do you believe that there is an existence more real than our own?

## Suggested Readings

A good short introduction to metaphysics is Richard Taylor’s *Metaphysics*, 4th ed. (Prentice-Hall, 1991). A good introduction to the pre-Socratic philosophers is John Burnet’s *Early Greek Philosophy* (Adamant Media, 2005). Plato’s *Republic* is available in a translation by G. M. A. Grube and revised by C. D. C. Reeve (Hackett, 1992). For a general introduction to Plato and his philosophy, see A. E. Taylor, *Plato, the Man and His Work* (Dial, 1936). A good contemporary introduction to Aristotle is Mortimer Adler’s *Aristotle for Everybody* (Touchstone, 1997). The main works of the three philosophers René Descartes, Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza, and Wilhelm Leibniz are included together in *The Rationalists* (Doubleday, 1960). In that volume, Spinoza’s *Ethics* is translated by R. H. M. Elwes, and Leibniz’s *Monadology* is translated by George Montgomery. An exciting history