

# Metaphysics and Grammar

William Charlton

B L O O M S B U R Y  
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

# Contents

Foreword	vi
1 Introduction	1
2 How Metaphysics Arose	21
3 Grammar and Lexicography	37
4 Wittgenstein and Chomsky on Grammar	47
5 Truth and Predication	69
6 Existence and Quantification	89
7 Goodness, Counsels and Commands	99
8 Change and Tense	117
9 Time and Aspect	127
10 Causation	141
11 Materiality	157
12 Thinking	169
13 Saying	193
14 Conclusion	205
Notes	213
Bibliography	221
Index	229

## Introduction

Truth, existence, goodness, time, causation, language, thought: these are central topics of philosophy. There are many things we think true, but what is truth? Scientists tell us what animals, vegetables and minerals exist, but they won't tell us what existence is. The difference between existing and not existing could hardly be more obvious or more important, but when we try to put it into words it slips away from us. History tells us what events have taken place; but what is it for an event to take place? Historians of ideas say what various people have thought, but what is thinking? All kinds of people clamour to tell us what is right and what is wrong; but what is it to *be* right or wrong?

Only philosophers address these questions. They tackle other questions too. Moral philosophers today discuss the ethics of abortion, infanticide, euthanasia. Political philosophers consider what systems of government or constitutional arrangements are just, and what rights societies should recognize and sanction. But these are questions about which many people have plenty to say, whereas questions like those I formulated in my first paragraph seem to be peculiar to philosophers.

And very peculiar they seem in themselves, when we look at them without a prejudice in their favour. We may wonder if they make sense, if they are proper English. 'What time is it?' is a normal question; 'What is time?' is not. Try asking it to the woman next to you on the bus, and even if she is a philosopher she will wonder if she has heard correctly: 'How do you mean, "What is time?"' If you are a stranger and a man, she may suspect you of some improper purpose. Similarly with 'What did he think?' and 'What is thinking?'; with 'What caused the crash?' and 'What is causing?'; with 'What would it be good to do?' and 'What is being good?' We have to bury our heads in the sand of 24 centuries of philosophical literature to blind ourselves to their oddity.

I call them 'metaphysical'. The word has a bad sound, which Hume at the end of his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* exploited in reply to an imagined objector:

All this is metaphysics, you cry. That is enough; there needs nothing more to give a strong presumption of falsehood. Yes, reply I, here are metaphysics surely; but they are all on your side, who advance an abstruse hypothesis, which can never be made intelligible, nor quadrate with any particular instance or illustration. (*Enquiries*, p. 289.)

A. J. Ayer, who professed himself a follower of Hume, defined a metaphysical sentence as one 'which purports to express a genuine proposition, but does, in fact, express neither a tautology nor an empirical hypothesis', and on the basis of this definition he declared 'we are justified in concluding that all metaphysical assertions are nonsensical' (1936, p. 41). Without going so far as that, Alan White argued that metaphysics typically ends in postulating 'the existence of entities undreamt of by our ordinary thinking' (among which, writing in the 1980s, he included God; *qualia* and Fregean 'thoughts' might have been better examples) (1987, p. 200). R. G. Collingwood, in contrast, defined metaphysics as the study of what he called 'absolute presuppositions' (1939), and argued that every systematic study has such presuppositions, and makes assumptions that cannot be shown to be true within the discipline. In fact the word metaphysics means very little. It comes from the Greek for 'after physics' and was first applied to certain writings by Aristotle perhaps for no reason except that in some collection of his works they came after the treatises on 'physics', a word which at that time covered all studies of natural phenomena. Aristotle's 'metaphysical' writings do however deal with such topics as being, becoming, existence, number and causation, and today 'metaphysics' is commonly used as a label for the part of philosophy that deals with the topics I have listed.<sup>1</sup> I simply follow that practice.

No less odd than the questions metaphysicians ask is their claim to be better able to answer them than other people. They promise to tell us more than ordinary adults know about truth, goodness, time, causation and the rest. Is that credible? What possible investigations could extend human knowledge about these things? In the last 50 years universities, at least in some English-speaking countries, have come to be seen as places not for higher education, but for research. Funding has been tied to extending human knowledge as distinct from just handing it on, and philosophers in university posts now speak of themselves as engaged in research. Empirical research can certainly help us to argue for or against changes in the laws concerning matters about which all societies have laws or customs – sex, death, citizenship, penal practice, the appointment of officers and so forth. By reading in libraries we can learn what philosophers in the past have said about things like truth, existence and

goodness. But what kind of research can give us fresh knowledge about those things themselves?

That question, at least, can be answered fairly easily. Philosophy has always been regarded as an arts subject, and that part of philosophy which deals with these topics is an art rather than a science. Research has no more place in it than it has in poetry or painting. It is legitimate for a novelist or a playwright who wants to set a story in the past or in a remote location to do some historical or geographical research, but nobody suggests that Homer or Shakespeare did that. Pure mathematics too is traditionally classed as an arts subject, and although mathematicians may talk of discovering properties of numbers and figures – not ordinary numbers and figures known to everyone, but the special ones known only to themselves, like those that appear in Marcus du Sautoy's *A Mathematician's Journey Through Symmetry* (2008) – these numbers and figures are not to be found in the physical world, and the mathematicians themselves have the creative project of constructing proofs. The fascination of metaphysical questions is, in fact, not unlike that of obstinate problems in pure mathematics. Why are the prime numbers distributed as they are through the series of natural numbers, the series 1, 2, 3 ...? Surely there ought to be a pattern, but no one has ever found out what it is. The primes get rarer as we progress along the series, but they still seem to be scattered at random. Why is the diameter of a circle incommensurable with the circumference? There is a proof of that, but it is extremely long and complicated;<sup>2</sup> surely there must be a simple explanation. Christian Goldbach (1690–1764) conjectured that every even number greater than three is the sum of two primes. That proposition is so simple that either it should be easy to prove it true or it should be easy to find a counter-example; but no proof or counter-example has yet been found. The mathematician considers things highly abstract – the series of natural numbers, the straight line and the circle, which seem both basic and independent of us, yet which baffle our intelligence; and so does the metaphysician.

If metaphysics is an art (something readers of its recent literature may be surprised to learn) it does not have to proceed by research. But how does it, or should it, proceed? And why should metaphysicians know more about its topics than anyone else? That is what I hope to explain in this book. Let me give an outline of my argument. It will probably sound obscure in parts, and when not obscure, highly questionable. But a work of metaphysics is not like a detective novel or a suspense story; from the start the reader needs all the help the author can provide, including an honest statement of where the argument is going.

Sentences are constructed out of words. That is true of all human languages. The words we use, or most of them, words like 'elephant', 'crimson', 'running', 'trumping', 'noun', 'arrogant', signify things that exist or might exist and are investigated by experts of various kinds: the zoologist, the physicist, the athletics trainer, the dedicated card-player, the grammarian, the clinical psychologist, or, in a different way, by the painter or the psychological novelist. The constructions we use have meaning too, but in a different way from these words. Sometimes when we speak we make a statement; sometimes we give advice or make a request; sometimes we explain how something was caused or prevented; sometimes we say why someone did or didn't do something. These are different forms of speech, different, we might say, linguistic acts. The constructions we use determine which of them we perform: using those constructions *is* asserting or counselling or explaining. And in determining this they are expressive of the topics of metaphysics.

At the base of all human language lie two grammatical distinctions which cut across one another: the simplest sentences are either indicative or non-indicative, and either predicative or existential. Examples of indicative sentences are 'That wine is red' and 'There are mosquitoes here', and the former is predicative, the latter existential. Examples of non-indicative sentences are 'Run!' and 'If only there were some water!' and again (though this is less obvious and may need arguing) the first is predicative, the second existential. Truth, I shall argue, is what is expressed by indicative constructions, so anyone who understands indicative constructions has the concept of truth; goodness or rightness is expressed by non-indicative, so anyone who understands these constructions has the notion of goodness; and existence, obviously, is expressed by existential constructions, though that sounds too simple, so instead of existential constructions I shall speak of constructions in which we quantify: the simplest sentences are those in which we either predicate something or quantify something.

The ideas of truth, goodness and existence are the most abstract and fundamental we have. They are bound up with the possibility of language. Less abstract are those of the most general features of the world of which we speak. This is a world in which we act. We have ideas of it as something apart from us, as that in which we act, and we also have ideas of ourselves as acting in it. As a world in which we act it is one in which changes take place over time and are caused. Change, time and causation characterize the physical aspect of the world. As agents acting in this world we desire some changes and are averse to others. Our preferences have reasons. And our action is for the purpose

of bringing about changes we desire and preventing changes to which we are averse. Acting for reasons and purposes characterizes the psychological aspect of us as agents in the world.

In Chapters 8 and 9 I show how the change, temporal relations and time itself are expressed by grammar: by verbs of doing and becoming, and by tense and aspect. (The difference between 'The leaves are turning yellow' and 'The leaves were turning yellow' is one of tense, while that between 'They were turning yellow' and 'They turned yellow' is one of aspect.) The concept of time, I argue, depends on a distinction which is created by grammar, the distinction between a change that takes place and its taking place. In Chapters 10 and 11 I show how causation is expressed in such grammatical devices as transitive and intransitive uses of verbs (as in 'The Sun melted the butter' and 'The butter melted') and what grammarians call 'voice'. (The voice is 'active' in 'Ahab killed a whale' and 'passive' in 'Ahab was killed by a whale'.)

In Chapter 12 and 13 I argue that the constructions we use in interpreting our behaviour, including our utterances, in terms of reasons and purposes, express the psychological side of our being, that they give us our ideas of consciousness, belief, desire, feeling and meaning.

All this may sound absurd. 'Truth', 'existence', 'goodness', 'think' and the rest are English words, and it is natural to suppose that truth, existence and goodness are the things they signify. It is natural, I mean, to suppose that, like 'elephant', 'breathing' and 'arrogance', they signify things that exist or might exist and can be investigated. Investigation might reveal that, like 'centaur', 'witchcraft' or 'phlogiston' they signify things that don't exist; but either they are words for things that are real, or they are words for things mistakenly believed to be real. I shall argue that they are neither. The supposition that they must be one or the other leads to philosophy that is either naive or sceptical. Some philosophers have made out that existence is a special kind of activity in which things engage, time a special kind of process that goes on, goodness a special property that can attach to actions, states of affairs or persons; that thinking a process in the way drinking and shrinking are processes, but one that is non-physical. Others have said that time and change are illusions, that nothing is objectively good or bad, that nothing really causes anything, or that mental states and processes are simply physical processes and states of the nervous system. I shall argue that the words which seem to signify the topics of metaphysics apply primarily not to things about which we think and speak but to our speech and thought about such things; they are words about words, second-order words, though they can also be used to give our speech a certain form.

If I am right, how are metaphysical topics to be investigated? How can we extend our knowledge of things expressed by grammar? In a way we cannot extend it. Children may extend it by learning new constructions, learning how to speak of the past and the future, how to explain changes that take place in the world and purposive human behaviour, but an ordinary adult already knows what truth, existence and the rest are. ‘What is time?’ Augustine asked. ‘If you don’t ask me, I know, but if you ask me I do not know’ (*Confessions* 11.14). The same could be said of all the other topics of metaphysics. We know what they are because we understand the constructions that express them; we cannot say what they are, because we do not know that understanding these constructions constitutes knowing what they are. We think that something further is required, but we cannot say what. Dr Johnson spoke of ‘the anfractuositities of the human mind’, using a word that suggests ‘a deep bay, full of inlets and caverns’ (R. A. Knox, 1958, p. 90). Among the deepest anfractuositities are thinking true, thinking real, thinking good, thinking something to be the causing of change, or intentional or conscious. The metaphysician must persuade us that we do conceive them as he or she claims; make us say ‘Yes, that’s what I thought but I couldn’t put it into words.’ Pope’s description of true wit fits good metaphysics:

Something whose truth convinced at once we find,  
That gives us back the image of our mind (*Essay on Criticism* 297–300)

That calls for the perceptivity of the psychological novelist together with a debater’s ability to anticipate and parry objections – a tall order.

The task attracts philosophers as certain subjects, the human figure, for example, or horses, attract representational painters. Constable, it seems, longs to put down on canvas what he sees in leafy trees, which is different from what Poussin saw and Monet was going to see. Cezanne returns more than once to the Montaigne Sainte-Victoire, as if he wants to get it clear, or try out a new treatment of it. That is how metaphysicians feel about existence, goodness and thought, though these abstract topics are perhaps less like leafy trees or the human figure than deserts. They may be compared to the strangely shaped mountains of the north west of Scotland, which have no trees on them and seem never to have been brought into the use of human beings; or to the gigantic rock formations of southern Utah that have brilliant colours and fantastic shapes, but are almost wholly bare even of vegetation. To spend hours pondering upon existence, truth or time is like walking in these alien landscapes.<sup>3</sup>

I am saying that the topics of metaphysics are things expressed not by words but by grammatical constructions. This claim is, I believe, novel. Philosophers,



at least since the Middle Ages, have paid little attention to grammar. Descartes and Leibniz toyed with the idea of a universal grammar,<sup>4</sup> but say nothing about the grammar of languages in which they wrote. Richard Gaskin recently edited a collection of papers entitled *Grammar in Early Twentieth-Century Philosophy* and says at the outset:

What is the philosophical significance of grammar? No period in the history of philosophy provides a richer source of materials for the consideration of this question than the period running from the end of the nineteenth century to the Second World War. (2001, p. i.)

Philosophers of that period, however, did not distinguish sharply between the study of grammatical constructions and lexicography, and said little about the former. Wittgenstein often used the word ‘grammar’ for any kind of study of words. Gaskin does not himself define grammar, and only one of his contributors, Alex Oliver, makes use of the work of grammarians; the rest just settle down to problems in the philosophy of language without any special regard for the way in which sentences are constructed. Some twentieth-century philosophers seem to imagine that language could exist without grammatical constructions.<sup>5</sup> Bede Rundle, indeed, in *Grammar in Philosophy* (1979) talks about constructions not only in English but in a wide range of languages. He does not, however, offer any general account of how grammatical constructions have meaning. He gives only two of his 480 pages (pp. 412–14) to discussion of how meaning attaches to different parts of speech and says:

It is sometimes said that indications of tense and number, for instance, have merely grammatical meaning. However, whatever that means, it remains true that at one level the pattern of explanation is as for other elements of language.

It is surprising he does not think it worthwhile to ask *what* ‘grammatical meaning’ means or discuss the distinction drawn by pre-Enlightenment philosophers between categorematic and syncategorematic terms. A few philosophers, for instance Zeno Vendler (1957) and Anthony Galton (1987), have noticed the grammatical phenomenon known as ‘aspect’, but they have not considered using it, as I shall, to explain the nature of time or the distinctions between being and becoming and belief and desire.<sup>6</sup>

A novel claim is liable to be misunderstood or, if understood, vigorously resisted. I shall first try to dispose of some misunderstandings, and then consider some sources of resistance.

First, the word ‘grammar’ itself may be misunderstood. It comes from the Greek *grammatike*, which means just literacy, the ability to read and write. In England it came to be used for ‘the science of speaking correctly’. That is how it is defined in *Todd’s Johnson’s Dictionary* in 1818, the year of Cobbett’s *Grammar of the English Language*, and this usage lingered on. ‘I’ve grammar and spelling for two and blood and behaviour for twenty’ sings Lord Tolloller in *Iolanthe* (1882). Noam Chomsky (1965) counts as the grammar of a language a complete description of it comprising rules of syntax for constructing sentences out of components, phonological rules for pronouncing and writing these components, and semantic rules giving the meaning of components. Traditionally, however, a distinction has been drawn between lexicography, which is listing the words in a language and saying what they mean, and grammar in a narrow sense, which is giving rules for the construction of sentences out of words. It is this narrower notion which the 1956 *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* tries to capture when it defines grammar as ‘that department of the study of language which deals with the inflexional forms, or their equivalents, and with the rules of employing them correctly’; and it is grammar in this restricted sense which I wish to connect with the topics of metaphysics.

Grammar needs to be distinguished from two other studies concerned with language, the philosophy of language and linguistics. Grammar is always the grammar of some particular language like English or French, just as a word is always a word in some particular language. Linguistics is the study of language generally; it is an attempt to say what is common to all languages, and to find rules for the construction of sentences that underlie all languages. The philosophy of language, which I am here taking to be part of metaphysics, deals with concepts which, both in grammar and in linguistics, are taken for granted; it deals with saying, meaning, speech and so forth. There is some overlap between these disciplines, but anyone can see that there is a difference between the grammarian’s question ‘How do you make statements in French?’, the linguist’s ‘How do you make statements in any language?’ and the philosopher’s ‘What is it to make a statement?’.

Unfortunately the notion that there is a correct way of speaking has been thought to buttress class distinctions, and British educationalists after 1945 therefore discouraged the teaching of grammar in state schools. As the result of this well-intentioned but ill-conceived policy many people come to study philosophy without knowing any of the technical terms of grammar in the narrow sense at all. Expressions like ‘indefinite article’, ‘demonstrative pronoun’, ‘pluperfect subjunctive’ and the dictionary’s ‘inflexional form’ seem to belong to

a terrifying alien language. It may be helpful, therefore, if I say right now a word about the term 'inflexion' or, as I prefer to spell it, 'inflection', which will appear often in what follows. An inflection is a modification of a word like adding an 's' to the end to indicate plurality. We say 'one bird' but 'several birds'. This is called an 'inflection of number'. English is not rich in inflections, but we also have an 'inflection of tense' that indicates something's belonging to the past: we say 'kill, *killed*', 'think, *thought*', 'drink, *drank*', and an 'inflection of person' which we use in saying that something was done by an individual other than ourselves or the person we are addressing: we say: 'I drink, you drink, he *drinks*'. Latin, which is a very highly inflected language, uses inflections where English uses other grammatical devices (the Dictionary's 'equivalents') such as prepositions like 'of', 'by', 'for' and so called 'auxiliary' verbs 'have' and 'will'.

Grammar being the study of how sentences in a given language are constructed, I do not pretend that metaphysics is part of grammar, or that grammarians know better than anyone else what truth, goodness or thought is. Grammarians have technical concepts of their own that they use in formulating their rules, concepts of subject and predicate, noun and verb and so on. These they can or should define. But the concepts of metaphysics are not among them. Grammarians use concepts of time, causation, belief, purpose and so on without analysing them rather as the rest of us do all the time – but with this difference, that we use them in thinking about natural phenomena, human behaviour and practical problems, whereas they use them in thinking that certain constructions express time or causation or belief or purpose. It is not the business of grammarians to say how metaphysical concepts work, but it is the business of metaphysicians to say how grammar works.

The claim that metaphysical concepts are expressed by grammar may sound similar at first to what is called the 'Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis'. In the 1930s Benjamin Lee Whorf, a disciple of Edward Sapir, put forward the idea that the grammar of a language determines the metaphysics of the society that uses it. The Hopi Indians of Arizona, for instance, have a different concept of time (he says) from Europeans. Their verbs do not have past, present and future tenses, but instead differentiate what is actual or objectively real from what is desired, intended or in other ways subjective or in the making. As a result, they do not have our concepts of past, present and future, or even our distinction between time and space (Whorf 1991, pp. 47–64). Whorf did not discuss in detail any metaphysical topic other than time, but he suggests that a society's grammar determines its concepts of action (pp. 72, 80), causation (pp. 80, 81) and number (pp. 139–40). The suggestion is not that a language's grammar imposes

metaphysical theories or analyses on the people who use it; Whorf recognizes that only philosophers are prepared to say what time, causation and number are. Rather the grammar of a society determines what topics its philosophers, if any should arise, will offer theories of.

Whorf was not a professional academic and never gave a full, systematic exposition of his hypothesis. Perhaps that is why it has been treated with less respect than I think it deserves. It has some affinity with my thesis, but the two are different and, in fact, opposed. Whorf believed that grammar determines how we think about the world, what formal concepts we apply to it. We Europeans think physical nature is characterized by change, time and causation; if we had a different grammar we wouldn't. I believe that all human societies have the same forms of thought, that everywhere people think that things exist or occur, that things are good or bad, that changes are brought about and prevented, sometimes for purposes. Different grammars are different systems for expressing the same forms of thought. When thought is expressed in words grammar divides it into statements, orders and explanations, and it is from these different forms of speech that we take our ideas of different forms of thought. At most our grammar shapes our thinking about our *thought* about the world.

It is commonly said today that during the twentieth century philosophy in English-speaking countries took a 'linguistic turn', which proved to be a blind alley and brought the discipline into disrepute. My claim that words like 'truth' and 'goodness' have a primary use in describing forms of speech may sound like a reversion to a discredited way of philosophizing, or perhaps a survival of it. What exactly was this linguistic turn? It is sometimes traced back to Gottlob Frege, who in 1879 published a paper with the subtitle 'A formalized Language of pure Thought modelled upon the Language of Arithmetic' (1952, p. 1). Some philosophers were attracted by the idea of such a language. Others, like A. J. Ayer (1936), used Kantian distinctions between analytic and synthetic judgments and between what can be known by experience and what can be known independently of experience to give a definition of meaning which would rule out as meaningless certain classes of indicative sentence: sentences purporting to express statements about God, rightness and wrongness and about beauty. This definition of meaning is now discredited, and many writers who accepted the description 'analytical philosopher' had no wish either to model all language on that of arithmetic or to dismiss metaphysics, theology, ethics and aesthetics as nonsensical. They simply thought that the main business of philosophy is to analyse certain concepts, to say, that is, how we conceive certain things or what we take them to be, and that the best way to do this is to take our way of

speaking about them as a guide. As an account of philosophy in general that is too narrow: logicians and moral and political philosophers do far more than analyse concepts and ways in which we use words. But if we want to discuss things like existence or time or goodness it is only common sense to ask how we conceive them, and in such enquiries we ignore language at our peril. What brought philosophy into popular disrepute was an irritating manner some philosophers had of parrying substantial questions by saying ‘It all depends on what you mean by the word “so-and-so”,’ or engaging in prolonged discussions of trivial English idioms – something that was well parodied by Tom Stoppard.

Many twentieth-century philosophers did work with a picture that goes back to Aristotle of three levels or tiers of reality, a verbal level of words that vary from one society to another, a conceptual level of ideas symbolized by these words, which are much the same for everyone, and a physical level of things of which the ideas are non-physical representations:

Spoken words are symbols (*sumbola*) of things produced in the mind (*pathêmata en têi psukhêi*), and written words of those that are spoken. And as written letters are not the same everywhere, so spoken words are not the same either; but the things of which these words are primarily signs, the things in the mind, are the same for everyone, and the things [in reality] of which these are likenesses are the same too. (*De Interpretatione* 16a3–8)<sup>7</sup>

These six lines were written not as a formal account but as part of an informal introduction to a treatise on language; nevertheless they have had enormous influence on European philosophy. It can be seen to this day. In ‘modern linguistics’, we are told by Marc C. Hauser, Noam Chomsky and W. Tecumseh Fitch, the word ‘language’ is used, not for languages like ‘English, Navaho, etc.’, but ‘to refer to an internal component of the mind/brain (sometimes called “internal language”)’ (2002, p. 1570). I do not rely on this Aristotelian picture, on the Kantian distinctions<sup>8</sup> or on a belief that arithmetic will serve as a model for all thought. I follow one twentieth-century thinker, Wittgenstein, in arguing that a principal source of bad metaphysics is misunderstanding of how language works; and I draw a distinction which was not recognized in the twentieth century between ideas expressed by words for things, and ideas expressed by constructions. Analysing the latter is quite different from analysing ideas expressed by words that work by signifying things, and proceeds by examining a different way in which words function, namely by determining forms of speech.

My enterprise may encounter resistance from two directions. Questions about truth, existence, goodness, time, causation and mind seem to be the

deepest that engage the human intellect. It may feel disappointing to be told that they are questions simply about words or thoughts. Timothy Williamson (2007) says 'Philosophy is in no deep sense a linguistic or conceptual inquiry' (p. 21, cf. p. 211). Taking concepts as 'something like mental or semantic representations,' he says they constitute 'only a small fraction of mind-independent reality' (pp. 30, 14). 'Many epistemologists study knowledge, not just the ordinary concept of knowledge. Metaphysicians who study the nature of identity over time ask how things persist, not how we think or say they persist.' 'Contemporary metaphysics studies substances and essences, universals and particulars, space and time, possibility and necessity' (pp. 211, 19).

If we ask how we are to study these latter chunks of mind-independent reality he tells us (chapter 6) to use thought experiments like the one that Edmund Gettier devised to show that knowledge is something more than justified true belief. Gettier (1963) imagined a situation in which a person has a belief which is true and justified but does not *know*. We might suppose that this exercise of imagination can shed light only on how we *conceive* knowledge or how we are prepared to use the *word* 'know'. But Williamson argues that at the heart of this procedure is a counterfactual conditional, 'If you had a true belief in the Gettier situation you wouldn't have knowledge', and claims that this is no more about concepts or words than 'If you had worn thicker underwear you wouldn't have hypothermia.'

He takes the question 'Was Mars always either dry or not dry?' as philosophical, or 'at least protophilosophical in character' (2007, p. 24), and holds, rightly, that it is about the planet Mars. He also says that a good philosophical account of vagueness would enable us to answer it. But vagueness is a property of language and thought. (A person who thinks or speaks vaguely might be called 'a vague person' but only a philosopher would call an object with indeterminate boundaries like a mountain 'a vague object'.) I am not qualified to pronounce on planets, but suppose we are on a walk together, and after a period of silence you pop out the question 'Is Utah dry?' I might respond by asking 'Do you mean dry as against wet or dry as against permitting the sale of alcohol?' That is a question about the sense in which you are using the word 'dry'. If you say 'Dry as against allowing the sale of drink,' I can answer your question: 'Parts are dry and parts not.' If, however, you say 'Dry as against wet,' I should seek further clarification: 'Why are you asking? What have you got in mind?' My reason would be that 'dry' and 'wet,' like 'large' and 'small' and 'loud' and 'soft,' are relative terms of a particular kind. Things are called dry or wet in relation to some norm, perhaps to an average, or perhaps to what is best for some purpose. Do you want to know whether the rainfall in Utah is above or below average, or whether the climate

is too dry for growing rice, or not too wet for a pleasant walking holiday? Here I am not uncertain about the sense in which you are using the word, but about the purpose for which you are using it in that sense. Williamson does not draw such distinctions, but I think a philosopher might just as well draw them as take Williamson's line and invoke three-valued and fuzzy logics.

Saying 'Philosophers shouldn't study just our concepts of knowledge and the rest; they should study the things themselves', involves both a mistake and a confusion. The mistake I have already identified. It is to suppose that words like 'know', 'think', 'true', 'exist', and 'good' do actually signify things in the same way as 'snow', 'blink', 'blue', 'insist' and 'blood'. The confusion is between two ways of studying representations. 'Zoologists', someone might say, 'don't just study pictures of elephants; they study elephants themselves.' But there are two ways of studying pictures of elephants. You can examine the pigments, the paper, the canvas that the artists employed, and weigh individual canvases, measure frescoes. Or you can see how elephants are represented. You might do that for various purposes. An art historian might compare different styles of representation. If, however, elephants should become extinct, future zoologists might have to work out their anatomy and ways of behaving from how they are represented in surviving pictures. Analytical philosophers who supposed truth, existence and the rest are realities signified by words in the same way as natural substances, qualities and modes of locomotion, still thought they have to be studied through the ways in which we think and speak about them; Williamson reproves them as though they advocated examining words in the way pictures are examined by removals men or analytical chemists.

Another philosopher who bids us study things directly and not through language is John Heil (2003). The idea that 'we must start with language and work our way outwards', he says (p. viii), 'is responsible for the sterile nature of much contemporary analytical philosophy'. The antidote is ontology, which he doesn't define but seems to conceive as the study of the things in the world that make true assertions true (*ibid.*). That sounds a good project, but what, then, distinguishes the ontologist from the historian, the natural scientist and other academics? From Plato onwards philosophers have drawn distinctions between things that 'make assertions true' which are quite different from the distinctions drawn by chemists between elements, by zoologists between species of animal, by musicologists between sounds. They have distinguished substances from qualities and relations, changes from states of affairs and so forth, labelling these categories by taking words from ordinary language but giving them technical, philosophical senses. Ontology deals with the basis of these distinctions, which

is debatable. Do daffodils differ from the colour yellow and the process of growth in what they are or in how they are spoken of? Heil himself arrives at two basic types of thing, which he calls 'objects' and 'properties', and argues that properties are "'particularized" ways particular objects are' (pp. 126–7),<sup>9</sup> but he starts (chapter 3) from the grammatical notion of a predicate-phrase like 'is red' (p. 27). His complaint against sterile analytical philosophers is that they accept (often unconsciously) what he calls the 'Picture Theory'. The 'core idea' of this theory, he tells us, is 'that the character of reality can be *read off* our linguistic representations of reality' (pp. 6, 23, 189). He does not explain this further, but what he means is that they think the surface grammar of sentences like 'That tomato is red' is a sure guide to the kinds of thing that make such sentences true and mirrors the structure of reality. That philosophers (and not just 'analytical' philosophers) think this and go astray in consequence is precisely the complaint Wittgenstein makes in his later writings. So far Heil and that leading 'linguistic' philosopher are in step. The remedy, however, is not to avoid language altogether like an unclean thing; if we do that we shall never explain how we mean to use words like 'object', 'property', 'quality' and 'disposition'. Rather we should study language more closely and see how the structure of reality is in fact expressed.

A different source of opposition to my theory may be found in cognitive science. In order to interact with the world as we do, driving cars, touch-typing, carrying on conversations, we need muscular skills and skills at recognizing things by sight and hearing under varying circumstances. Cognitive scientists ask *how* we do these things. They identify the physiological processes involved in controlling our limbs and perceiving. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999) claim that this work shows how metaphysical questions arise and how to deal with them. Williamson denies that we should study our concepts of time, existence and the rest, but holds, nevertheless, that we can do metaphysics without leaving our armchairs. They disagree on both points. To analyse the concepts we must team up with neurologists and conduct (presumably painless) experiments on student volunteers. Stimulations of sense-organs produce neural states, which are 'the neural mechanisms that give rise to concepts'; these states are in fact 'embodiments of concepts' and shape or determine them (pp. 36–7). The concepts of metaphysics are formed out of these primal concepts by composition and transference comparable to the transference of words in metaphor. Cognitive science reveals that they are accumulations of concepts borrowed from various sources, mutually inconsistent but each with its uses. Time, for example, is conceived as motion, and that in two incompatible ways, and also as a kind of substance (pp. 52, 139–48); existence is 'presence in a bounded region



around a deictic center' (p. 205) It is futile, they infer, to seek clear and coherent accounts of metaphysical topics. We must just acknowledge the inconsistencies and use whatever account suits us on each occasion. I grant that if such brain processes did not occur we should not have the metaphysical concepts we have, and it is interesting to know just what their sources are. But we can certainly argue that some conceptions are wrong and misleading; and I do not see how any neurological discovery could make it impossible ever to arrive at an account of something like time or existence that is completely unimpeachable. Someone enamoured of empirical methods might wait and see.

In a literary metaphor you transfer a word which applies to one thing to another to which it is known not to apply. This normally has the effect of bringing our ideas of the things to which it does apply, what Lakoff and Johnson call the 'source', into interaction with our thought about the thing to which we apply it, the 'target'. It may make us look for analogies between the two. Reading Shakespeare's lines:

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought  
I summon up remembrance of things past ...

we are led to conceiving thinking at leisure about past experiences on the model of a judicial sitting to which people may be summoned as witnesses. When we read:

Then let not winter's ragged hand deface  
In thee thy summer, ere thou be distilled:  
Make sweet some vial

We think of the person addressed *as* a flower without thinking he *is* a flower. So much is a commonplace of literary theory. Many philosophers, including Wittgenstein, have remarked that people unconsciously conceive time on the model of movement, the mind on the model of the body, thought on the model of seeing, and other metaphysical topics by transferring to them concepts obtained through our sensori-motor system. Cognitive scientists may identify neural processes underlying or matching these ways of thinking. I do not think it follows that some physical necessity obliges us to think as we do. Wittgenstein said that we model the mind on the body and thinking on bodily movements partly because we use the same grammatical constructions in speaking of both. The same might be suggested about time, that it is our grammar that leads us to conceive it as we do.

A poet assumes we have some knowledge of the targets, memory, beautiful youths, old age and so forth, independently of the sources – sittings of

magistrates, flowers, the succession of the seasons. If we had no conception of the topics of metaphysics, how could we transfer other concepts to them? Lakoff and Johnson sometimes speak of a non-metaphorical conceptual 'skeleton' or of 'literal' concepts (1999, pp. 128, 134). We have a literal concept of the mind as 'what thinks, perceives, believes, reasons, imagines, and wills' (p. 266), that is, as the subject of mental activities. We also have a literal conception of causation as 'a determining factor for a situation'. The word 'determine' here sounds metaphorical, but we are told that a factor is determining if, in its absence, 'we could not conclude that the situation existed' (p. 177). They may not realize it, but Lakoff and Johnson are here drawing upon the grammatical notions of a subject and a counterfactual conditional.

Talk of interaction between modes of thought is itself metaphorical, and students of literature do not ask what it is to think of one thing as a model for another. Lakoff and Johnson probably think that an explanation of this can be given in terms of interacting neurological networks, and that this interaction is inevitable. I should prefer to say that thinking metaphorically is a matter of *comparing* source and target, that comparison is a form of intelligence, and that although inclinations to misconceive things like existence, time and thought may be unavoidable, at least by speakers of European languages, they can be resisted.

The philosophers I have mentioned are agreed that attention to language was a wrong turn for philosophy; has it found the right way now? Williamson is remarkably optimistic:

He says: In many areas of philosophy we know much more in 2007 than was known in 1957; much more was known in 1957 than in 1907; and much more was known in 1907 than was known in 1857. (Williamson 2007, pp. 279–80)

And he gives *truth* as something about which far more is known.

This progress, if it is real, has not been made without cost. In 1957 philosophical books and articles were largely intelligible to educated non-philosophers. We have arrived today at a situation like that which existed in the Greek-speaking world under Justinian and in Western Europe in the later middle ages: there are plenty of experts, but they write chiefly for one another according to very strict rules. The arguments are intricate and tortuous, and are expected to take note of every relevant point made in the ever expanding literature. This description applies equally to Simplicius's commentaries on Aristotle,<sup>10</sup> to commentaries on the Sentences of Peter the Lombard, and to our contemporary quarterly *Mind*. The new knowledge about truth is:

the result of technical work by philosophical and mathematical logicians. ... on how close a predicate in a language can come to satisfying a full disquotational scheme for that very language without incurring semantic paradoxes. (Williamson 2007, pp. 281–2; this from someone who condemns ‘the linguistic turn’)

It is as though philosophers forget what ordinary language is like when they sit down to write. Williamson gives ‘Was Mars always either uninhabited or not dry?’ as an example of ‘a recognizably *unphilosophical* question’ (p. 25, my emphasis). And here is what he says (pp. 64–5) about logical truth:

In one good sense, sentences of the form ‘P if and only if actually P’ are logical truths, and therefore Frege-analytic, because true in every model (Davies and Humberstone 1980, Kaplan 1989). Nevertheless they can express contingent truths on the same reading; it is not necessary for me to be my actual height. Although we could add a modal qualification to the definition of logical truth in order to exclude such examples, by requiring logical truths to be true at every world in every model, this mixing together of the modal dimension with the world dimension is bad taxonomy; perspicuous basic notions keep such different dimensions separate.

But is it really credible that philosophers today have a better knowledge of what truth is than ordinary people 50 or even 2,000 years ago? Philosophy, I repeat, is more like the arts than the sciences.

Can writers today tell us more about human life than Shakespeare or Homer? Do artists today know more about how to represent the human figure than Degas, Michelangelo or Praxiteles? Styles of representation change, but do not necessarily improve. It may be that some artists today try to please only professional teachers or critics, and care nothing about what ordinary people think about their work, but that does not justify philosophers in taking a similar stand. In fact they write as they do because they conceive philosophizing as a form of research, and hope to make advances in philosophy like those in science that are presented in the magazine *Nature*. I quote Williamson again since as Wykeham Professor at Oxford he has had responsibility for many graduate students:

It must be sensible for the bulk of our research effort to be concentrated in areas where our current methods make progress more likely. (2007, p. 287)

Philosophers ought to ask themselves if it is worthwhile to devote their lives to writing what not only is as unreadable, but also goes out of date as quickly, as scientific research. A professor whom I shall not name said to me a few years ago that he did not think it was possible any longer for someone who

had taken the Oxford classics course taken by Isaiah Berlin, Gilbert Ryle, A. J. Ayer, Bernard Williams and other twentieth-century philosophers to have a career teaching philosophy, because the expertise now needed in logic and the philosophy of language could not be acquired by anyone also studying ancient literature and history. That is no ground for complacency. Metaphysics withered in the past because it became too professional, and it could well perish from the same disease today. Although its topics seem abstract and irrelevant to practical life, although it may seem to have value only as a kind of idle recreation like walking in deserts or, as Hume says, 'bringing home half a dozen woodcocks or plovers, after having employed several hours in hunting after them' (*Treatise* 2.3. 10; p. 452), if it is to flourish it must be capable of attracting amateurs. It revived in the seventeenth century because Descartes wrote, as he put it, so that 'even women' might understand something of what he said.<sup>11</sup> By the nineteenth, thanks to the professionalism of Kant and Hegel, in Continental universities it had retreated into what Peacock called 'transcendental darkness',<sup>12</sup> but it came to receive new life in England from the lucid and stylish English of Bertrand Russell, and from an intelligent re-reading of Plato and Aristotle. So long as metaphysics can engage the general reader, there remains open a channel through which it can feed and fertilise, if only subliminally, our understanding of ourselves and our place in the universe; it can work in our culture like wine in a sauce: you may not taste the wine, but it makes the whole dish better. This will not happen if new original works freeze off the general reader, and if no one will interpret or criticize the classic works of the past.

What follows is intended to be an original work; but I shall not refer to every recent work that touches on the same topics; I couldn't if I tried, and if I did the result would be intolerable to non-professionals. I shall refer to selected works by Wittgenstein and Chomsky which I think it imperative to discuss if you are examining the relations between metaphysics and grammar; I shall quote from eminent past philosophers when I think this will help to make clear what ideas and positions I am considering; and I shall be as colloquial as the somewhat crabbed nature of the subject matter and of those dedicated to it allows. To borrow the motto of the Scrope family, *devant si je le puis*. I do not expect to achieve a real page-turner, but my project is to demystify metaphysics, and that is a literary no less than a philosophical ambition.

Before constructive work can start, however, some preliminaries are necessary. Orwell says in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that those who control the past control the future. No philosopher works without what is now called a 'narrative', a story about the history of the subject, how it started, how it progressed, who were

the good guys and who the bad. I think many philosophers working today are hampered by narratives that are unhistorical. In Chapter 2 I say how, in Europe at least, metaphysics began. I show that it arose in tandem with grammar, and I have further reasons for this historical section. The philosophers of classical Greece were artists as great, in their peculiar way, as the poets and sculptors. The work of Plato and Aristotle has hardly dated more than that of Aeschylus or Phidias. They avoid errors into which more recent philosophers, ignorant of their work, have fallen, and Horace's words:

*Vos exemplaria Graeca  
Nocturna versate manu, versate diurna*<sup>13</sup>

are advice to philosophers no less than to poets.

I must also explain more fully than I did just now what grammar is and how it differs from lexicography.