

Is there any place for a "fundamental ontology" in my understanding of metaphysics?

In my usual way of expounding what is meant by "metaphysics," I distinguish, with certain important provisions, between *metaphysica generalis* or ontology and *metaphysica specialis*, as comprising the three disciplines of psychology or, better, anthropology, cosmology, and theology. Underlying this distinction is my view that always already given—implicitly or explicitly, authentically or inauthentically—in any self-understanding and life-praxis is an understanding of self, world, and God (or, more generally, self, others, and the whole), and therewith an understanding of ultimate reality as such. Metaphysics *in the broad sense*, then, I take to be the attempt, at the secondary level of critical reflection and proper theory, to formulate this always already given understanding explicitly, in a clear and coherent conceptuality-terminology.

In this attempt, the discipline of anthropology, or, as it might even better be called (considering how "anthropology" has now come to be used), existentialist analysis, plays a peculiar role. Unlike both the whole and others—not any particular others, but *some* others, or others as such—the self as such is not necessary but contingent. Insofar, then, as by "ultimate reality" is meant *strictly* ultimate reality, and thus what is necessary, as distinct from everything merely contingent, metaphysics *in the strict sense*—as critical reflection on and the proper theory of strictly ultimate reality—does not include, but rather excludes existentialist analysis. On the other hand, the self that as such is contingent *is* necessary to our *understanding* of ultimate reality—and that in two distinct but related senses of the words. It is thus necessary in one sense, because, unless we existed as selves, we could not understand anything, implicitly or explicitly, and so metaphysics, among other things, would be impossible. The self is thus necessary in a second sense, however, in that the self is the only sample of ultimate reality that we understand in the unique sense of also being it. Although we can never understand ourselves except by also understanding others and the whole, we are not others and the whole, and such understanding as we can have of either of them as they are in themselves must be derived somehow from our understanding of ourselves.

For this reason, existentialist analysis may be quite properly characterized as "fundamental ontology." Although it belongs to metaphysics only in the broad, not in the strict, sense of the word, existentialist analysis is nonetheless fundamental to cosmology and theology as well as to the ontology constituting general metaphysics. Any understanding we have of the strictly ultimate reality of others or the whole, or of ultimate reality simply as such, we have only by analysis of, or analogy with, our own ultimate reality as selves.

Insofar as our understanding of the strictly ultimate reality of others and the whole, as well as of ultimate reality as such, is also attained by way of analogy with what we understand of ourselves, our metaphysics is a partly material, *categorial* metaphysics. On the other hand, insofar as our understanding of strictly ultimate reality is attained solely by way of analysis—an analysis dependent upon but also going beyond existentialist analysis of the necessary conditions of the possibility of existence to analysis of the necessary conditions of the possibility of anything concrete at all—our metaphysics is a purely formal, *transcendental* metaphysics.

Because any meaningful analogical understanding necessarily presupposes some literal, nonanalogical understanding, any categorial metaphysics always necessarily presupposes some transcendental metaphysics. But the converse does not hold. There can very well be a transcendental metaphysics, derived by yet further analysis of the fundamental ontology constituted by existentialist analysis, even where there is no corresponding categorial metaphysics, or where even the possibility of such a metaphysics is questioned or denied.

22 May 1997