

On "Ultimate Reality"

1. Hitherto I have distinguished between "reality" as "what we in some way find ourselves obliged to take account of" (William James) and "ultimate reality" as "what we are all finally obliged to take account of insofar as we exist humanly at all, whatever other things we may or may not have to take account of in each leading our individual life." I have also further distinguished "strictly ultimate reality" as "what not only human existence but any existence whatever would be obliged to take account of, whatever other things it might or might not have to take account of."

2. The trouble with these distinctions, however, is that "ultimate reality" is thereby simply identified with necessary reality, with the unwelcome implication that any contingent reality there may be could not be ultimate. But this, obviously, will not do. The contingent is as ultimately real as the necessary and, in fact, is the inclusive category in that it includes the necessary as the concrete includes the abstract. Thus, while contingent things are such that I may not have to take account of them in the way in which I am obliged to take account of necessary things, any one of them of which I in some way find myself obliged to take account is as ultimately real as anything that is necessary.

3. There is nothing to be done, then, but either to abandon the distinction between "reality" and "ultimate reality" (as well as "strictly ultimate reality") or else to redefine it, so that James's definition applies to "ultimate reality," while "reality" is taken to include the merely apparent, the fictional, and so on.

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