

Metaphysical Sense

World and Life

There is a fundamental intellectual problem that modern philosophy has brought forward and has not been able to solve. It is disclosed, or at least located, by this sort of consideration:

Whichever way I turn, whatever fills or teases my awareness, there is always *this*, here and now and ongoing. Here is an apple; and here I am curiously inspecting the apple. These two aspects of *this* are always present. I live in a *world* of structuring forms and material dispositions that enforces recognition of what there is to be dealt with, a world containing apples. At the same time I *live* in this world, scheming and dreaming as well as sensing; in this living synthesis my personal grasp and prospects are enforced on every element of my experience, including the recognized, appetizing apple. The objective and subjective modes of presence are very different. An apple is solid, weighty, measurable; a perception of an apple is vivid, pleasant, memory-haunted. Thing and thought do not *touch* in either the thing-like sense of physical contact or the thought-like sense of sensing. And yet things and thoughts are always connected with each other in the flow of occurrence (I am perceiving an apple now because one is right here before me; the apple is the one that it is because it can be seen right here) as well as in their identifiable structures (I am perceiving roundness because the apple is actually round; the apple is “round” because I can register that typical shape). However strenuously it imposes itself, the real world can never register as anything except in grasps of it like mine, and my living

synthesis, even in dreams, can never be shown to be purely self-generated or self-formed—the world is always with me.

What then is the fundamental consistency of the relationship between thoughts and things?

The contemporary view of this question has been greatly affected by the knowledge bonanza of natural science—lately by evolutionary biology and neuroscience most of all. We are busily evaluating newly discovered facts having to do with the physical enablement of our subjective life. Is the scientific explanatory project of reducing all appearances to natural facts finally in a position to relieve subjectivity from its role as a primary ontological condition?

That outcome is not really thinkable. No discovery could change the basic constitution of either subjective living or the objectively existing world, including the trumping power each possesses. These are supremely inescapable givens. Materialism has no more chance to eliminate the one than idealism has to eliminate the other. But if we lack an intelligible model of the general relationship between thoughts and things, we cannot feel secure in our fundamental understanding of *what* is involved in *this*. To explain the relationship without violating its constituents is an ultimate sense-making challenge.

A pragmatist or historical materialist approach to the desired explanation would suppose that our daily action upon our environment and ourselves is the supreme sense-making. What we are actually doing determines for every context what can count as commonality or difference, constraint or independence, relevant signal or irrelevant noise, in the relation between life and world. Metaphysical sense is thus constantly being resolved by economic activity, scientific research, politics, and education. A possible illustration of this thesis is how we have lately come to understand humans together with all other natural beings as members of a fundamentally interdependent “ecological” reality because we are now mobilized to preserve a habitable Earth.

The practicality in sense-making is undeniable. But our practice includes puzzlements and pauses of reflection that are lately triggered ever more frequently by our scientific studies of ourselves. In the most clarifying of pauses that is possible for us now, how may we conceive the relation between the subjective and objective consistencies of life in the world? What are thoughts, thinking also of things? What are things, seeing that thoughts are always present also? How can available meanings relate thoughts and things?

The metaphysical thinker seeks a position of intellectual advantage here by asking a specially framed question of maximum generality and depth: How, in principle, may beings obtain? What, if anything, can be seen, thought, and said consistently about the constitution of beings in face of the basic heterogeneity in being that crops out at the level of things and thoughts?

But have we not long since been disabused of the metaphysical question? Would any reasonable person now try to say something true about the general character of being? How could any such attempt gain intellectual traction, given the multiplicity of contexts in which we identify and explain beings? Even if the very notion of metaphysical truth is not incoherent—even allowing that we might say something significant about the ground or consistency of everything that can be spoken of—hasn't the history of metaphysics shown that metaphysical claims contradict each other endlessly and metaphysical argumentation is hopelessly inconclusive?

One might concede the intellectual weakness of metaphysics and still find compelling practical reason to adopt a metaphysical position. In one classic phase of Hellenistic philosophy, Epicureanism and Stoicism each made a metaphysical conception integral to living the best life. Epicureanism offered relief from fear of the gods, death, and afterlife and supported individual freedom of action with its materialist theory of spontaneously swerving atoms. Stoicism offered relief from fear of misfortune and death by stipulating that all existing things are bodied forth and reabsorbed in a cosmic divine fire and all events are shaped by cosmic rationality. In Stoic perspective, Epicurean atomism is a surrender to chaos, while the Epicureans think that the suffocating Stoic determinism is equally bad. Each school points to the other as an object lesson in how metaphysical disaster threatens and must be prevented by acquiring the right intellectual equipment for living in the world.¹ Each is based on a sufficiently plausible metaphysical theory, not a provable one. Generously regarded, each view might qualify as proto-Kantian in giving its metaphysical doctrine an ethical justification. It seems possible to be an intellectually circumspect, practically engaged Epicurean or Stoic in that way. But neither view offers much help in relating thoughts and things generally as that problem now faces us.

A conclusion often drawn about classic metaphysical debates is that they can never be resolved, but it would be even more discouraging to realize that metaphysical reasoning *typically* produces life-distorting conclusions—monism, for example, which undermines the reality of individuals

and relationships; or determinism, which undermines the freedom and responsibility of agents; or materialism, which blocks recognition of the subjective quality of experience and the ideal force of logical and ethical meanings; or idealism, which underestimates (if not falsifying outright) the causal power and complexity of the empirical world.² Perhaps the maneuver of explaining the general consistency of being is inherently treacherous.

But can we be adequately protected against metaphysical disaster without a metaphysical defense?

If metaphysics is fallacious or ontologically biased at its core, then there is no hope of putting it in order. We should just drop it. We might quell the motivations that prompted it. We might learn to recognize questions like “What kind of thing are thoughts?” and “Are all my actions causally determined?” as misconceived, so that we will stop tripping ourselves up with reductive materialism and determinism. We might become better satisfied with various contextually appropriate ways of forming our understanding, grabbing the handholds of sense that are actually available.

There has been no lack of interest in making this sort of intellectual turn, but the post-metaphysical programs that have held the field in Western philosophy for more than a century have not prevented trouble of the metaphysical kind. Analytic philosophy, professing allegiance to natural science, has been haunted by monism, determinism, and materialism and is now vexed by the excessively hard problems of naturalizing consciousness and meaning. Continental philosophy, plumbing a resonant abyss in interpreting life *not* lived in the presence of intelligible being—in short, thinking after Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger—is still driven by willful idealism in such a way that determinate, useful connections between reflection and empirical reality remain elusive. Although the adherents of either of these approaches would prefer to challenge the other on different grounds, both evidently need a metaphysical corrective.

There are notable new metaphysical correctives on offer. The Whiteheadian and Deleuzian versions of process thought have enthusiastic and able advocates. Indeed the process premise seems very advantageous, and I too will rely on it. But the Whiteheadian and Deleuzian approaches plunge into their own creative redescription of the world and life in such a way that they amplify their native biases (idealist and materialist, respectively) and fail to straighten out metaphysics in the philosophical mainstream.³

There may be substantial positive reasons why metaphysical thinking persists in an age called post-metaphysical—certain metaphysical topics and gambits of sense-making may really be intellectually inescapable once they

have been introduced—but it may be true at the same time that metaphysics persists because we chronically overreach for intellectual control of our situation. We may be uncomfortable with our ultimate ignorance. We may crave a pervasive formal recognizability in our world. Or we may simply be unable to stop short of maximally affirming a positive sense-maker like “being” or “essence” or “I think” once we have thought of it, so that we have no choice but to wrestle with the difficulties it generates. Or we may feel that we would be failing in appreciation of our values if we did not use the metaphysical idiom to inscribe them in being.

I confess that my own view of the situation has been changed by studying the chief intellectual frustrations in contemporary philosophy of mind and philosophical theology in light of the history of metaphysics. You, esteemed reader, probably know better than I did. I used to regard metaphysical thinking as arbitrary and inconsequential and saw no end to the counter-claiming of diversely plausible “worldviews.” It is all too easy, I thought, to be enchanted with an attractive but purely optional redescription of everything. More seriously, I distrusted metaphysically framed philosophies of life as ethically facile: surely our responsibilities impose themselves in actual practice and are not to be deduced from a conception of being. Thus I was aware in one way of the trouble that might be caused by a lack of the right kind of metaphysical grip. Now I am aware of many more troubles and have come to accept that our most serious thinking always moves partly on a discernable plane of metaphysical sense on which we will either stumble or more or less lucidly advance in relating thoughts and things and conceiving the basic kinds of organization of being.

I remain worried that when we do embrace metaphysical solutions we tend to overextend their sense and give them an undue influence on other sorts of thinking, especially directive thinking. All the great systems encourage this abuse. Accordingly, I will follow the example of Kant in proposing limits on the jurisdiction of metaphysics. But as an alternative to Kant’s epistemologically framed central distinction between unknowable things-in-themselves and phenomenal contents of experience—a distinction of the greatest importance for Kant, as it makes room in the unknowable realm for ethical freedom and responsibility as practical certainties—I submit that the most fundamentally clarifying central distinction we can draw is between beings as appeal-making, trial-bearing partners in *meaningful* encounter and beings in their intellectually comprehensible, *sense-bearing* being. Although this distinction and ranking of kinds of meaning is broadly speaking a Kantian strategy, it will allow for a more-than-Kantian appreciation of the

realism and enduring relevance of metaphysical construals of our situation, on the one hand, and of the basic worth of everything in the world's whole manifold—not just the worth of a pure moral reason placed above mechanical nature—on the other.

What may we hope for from a metaphysical scheme? A satisfactory scheme would be fully supportive of cognitive gain; it would not interfere with discerning any sort of being or occurrence. Nor would it simply teach us a redundant new vocabulary. It would be hospitable to diverse kinds of meaning—for example, it would not distort ethical meaning by making responsible agency a component of a mechanically deterministic world-system. But it would give us more coherent direction than we can ever get from milling about in the marketplace of diversely suggestive intuitions. Like Neoplatonism, or Thomism, or process thought, it would have a strong intellectual personality. It would help us to navigate our forced intellectual choices in forming a picture of the consistency of being—judging what is abstract and concrete, horizontal and focal, owned and owning—yet without steering these choices down one or another of the known roads to intellectual disaster.

For a wholesome neutrality and modesty in metaphysical thinking we need a well-considered conception of its proper medium, metaphysical sense.

Sense and Meaningfulness

We have various ways of maintaining a cognitively stable position while dealing with life's situations. These are ways of “making sense” of situations, we say, or finding sense in them. A useful general notion of sense may be derived from this ordinary way of speaking.

Sense is a minimal condition for being oriented. Preliminarily we might think of sense as the cognitive guide rope in a workable partnership of conscious subjects with a world and with each other; to the extent that sense is present, subjects are able to proceed. To the extent that sense is present in discourse, subjects are able to communicate. Sense is realized in universal terms, for example, which are sustained by our shared interest in dealing with similar particulars interchangeably. Essence-defining discourse is sustained by our interest in tuning the signal of thought so that we share clear and reliable terms of intending. Fact-reporting discourse is sustained by our shared recognition that some things are so. Explanatory and teleological discourse is sustained by our shared awareness that every step we take forward is conditioned by diachronic constraints and opportunities.

Rationally clarified terms, locutions, and arguments enable us to take very precise steps of sense-making in full daylight, so to speak, but there may be kinds of sense that orient us without being in our ordinary consciousness. For various reasons we may suspect hidden depths of sense. The test of such possibilities is to exhibit their intentionally graspable form and show how they guide us. Extensions of sense past ordinary observation (as in theories of instinct, the unconscious, or Being-in-the-world, for example, or in religious concepts of karma or emptiness) are useful, at our discretion, if they enable us to take and retake definite intellectual steps.

Meaningfulness is not the same as sense. We speak of meaningfulness when a prospectively *sufficient* condition for orientation obtains, as when we willingly respond to a being that (from our perspective) *claims* our attention. We may also recognize the meaningfulness of representations or clues that direct us toward beings we believe to be *worthy* of attention, as with a statistic that is meaningful in accurately representing an important fact.

The variously used concept “meaning” swings between sense, at a minimum, and full meaningfulness at the maximum. Sense must be recognizable and followable, affording a mental grip, but it need not be compelling. It simply must be present if we are to understand anything. In a “senseless” situation we are baffled. (Sometimes we say a situation “makes no sense” when the problem is really a deficit of motivation. We feel unable to go forward.) Senselessness can be caused by an absence of meaning in the sense of an expression’s capacity to do normal work in a signifying system—the sense in which “bike” and “I have a bike” have meanings in English and “ekib” and “bike a have I” do not, or the sense in which “Bring me the bike!” has meaning and “Where is the bike?” does not when we both see the bike. Sense does involve diachronic direction—a grasp of process, causality, and teleology sufficient to be able to respond to “Bring me the bike!”—but senselessness differs from the meaninglessness of lacking an *affirmable* direction in life. For instance, one can claim that history is meaningless because all actors and actions disappear forever in the passage of time, but that thesis clearly has historical sense since it addresses the intelligible topic of the past of action and presupposes a desire of agents to pursue significant goals. In this case one understands but declines to engage.

Meaningfulness is marked by *prima facie* sufficiency (for a subject, in a situation) while sense is marked by its openness to, and in some cases its need for, added sense. One reason that sense tends to grow is that we curiously seek and continually find further explications of the implicit or potential meaning of any sense-bearing item. A second, more dominating

reason lies in our communicative action. In the social maneuvering of ordinary communication we constantly overlay the ostensible descriptive sense of our utterances with prescriptive sense, often adding humorously ironic sense on top of that. Sometimes we build up layers of sense quite seriously and constructively; in a sophisticated thought-world it can be normal for the literal sense of a canonical text to be bundled with several other important senses (as in the medieval Christian allegorical scheme of literal, typological-historical, moral, and spiritual senses). Such practice might be denounced as extravagant, but really it is normal for sense to be layered on and compounded, right up to the apparent limits of our capacity to register senses and wishfully beyond. Since most linguistic communicators are capable of adopting multiple orientations at once, we often can or must try for the best rapport with our interlocutors by deploying added sense and capitalizing as best we can on the ambiguities generated by putting multiple senses in play. Adding metaphysical sense is a case in point. The givenness of certain facts may be anchored by metaphysical necessity or aerated by metaphysical possibility (such as the possibility that we are dreaming what we seem to perceive); the methodological physicalism of certain sciences may be amplified or rendered newly problematic by adopting metaphysical physicalism as an ultimate reconciliation of intellectual reflection and empirical investigation.

If minimal sense-making *enables* following a meaning, then we might think of maximal sense-making as *necessitating* following a meaning. Something that made “perfect sense” could not be understood differently in any respect. By this standard, of course, nothing makes perfect sense, and yet the ideal of perfect sense has been taken seriously, and many have worshipped at the altar of Euclidean geometry or some other supposed realization of it. But even if there were a perfectly compelling sense-making, it would not be compelling in the same way that meaningfulness is. It would, on the contrary, be an obstacle: the involuntariness of totally directed sense-following contradicts the exposure to challenge and voluntary commitment in being a disciple of meaningfulness.

Because meaningfulness involves voluntary response and a practically overriding constraint of responsibility, we find in it distinctive meanings of both necessity and contingency: the imperative necessity of making infinite adjustments to bring relationship with other beings nearer to justification, and the fraught contingency of what the requirements of the relationship will be and how well I will do. In sense-making, however, necessity is just

formal or factual and contingency is just the absence of formal or factual necessity.

I offer four further clarifications of the concept of meaningfulness to guard against certain common ways of using the category that fail to address the main point of concern here.

(1) The “engaged agent perspective” is an attractive frame for philosophical claims about meaningfulness, but the distinction between sense and meaningfulness does not coincide exactly with the distinction between the detached observer and engaged agent perspectives. Even detached observers require something meaningful to observe (unless they fall into the centerless state of *total* detachment, a malignant version of Nagel’s View from Nowhere, not to be confused with the universe-centered perspective of reasonable objectivity); engaged agents, for their part, are always obliged to make sense of the matters with which they deal.⁴

(2) Meaningfulness does not coincide with “enchantment” in the sense usually involved in worries that modern people live in a disenchanted world. Certainly there are difficulties in finding and securing meaningfulness associated with modern conditions, both in everyday living and in attempts to make sense of meaningfulness in theory. For that matter, no life or culture can be free of anxious uncertainty. But the absence of a fully satisfying or compelling meaningfulness in one’s life is not the same as a total absence of meaningfulness, which would make human life impossible.

(3) Neither does meaningfulness coincide with “value.” Values are ideals that help to make sense of our responses to the meaningful. It is true that in practice we heed and sometimes even revere our values as such, but this attitude is problematic, since values (as distinct from their warrants) are just instrumental. “Value” may seem to serve well as a general rubric for species of meaningfulness, but value talk always enforces the premise of a subjectively framed evaluation of the matter at hand, which distorts or screens off non-typical offers of meaningfulness.⁵

(4) Nor is meaningfulness necessarily the object of “normative” thinking or discourse, if by “normative” we mean the prescription and following of definite rules (from *norma*, the carpenter’s rule). I recommend the broader concept of “directive” thinking or discourse to include diverse kinds of appeal and position-taking in relation to the meaningful. To be sure, norms are essential institutions in various frames of reference, are generated in all rationalization of directive practice or experience, and often must be of preeminent interest to us, but they are not the only or necessarily the

most basic or best determiners of our orientation. Like values, norms are sense-making gambits, and critical study of norms is concerned as much with their sustainable intelligibility as with the substantive satisfaction they give in managing relationships.

Sense, Success, and Satisfaction

Sense is a victory of successful formation. It is pleasant to walk, no matter where, and to talk competently, regardless of what we talk about; it is *very* pleasant and great fun (though perhaps not yet joy) to talk intensely or complexly. In making sense, one has gone forward; one took another step and landed somewhere; at the very least, one has not lost one's orientation, and may have gained a better.

One may have succeeded in some basic ways and yet not have succeeded as one intended, or as a situation required. "Look at the eagle!" "You mean, the vulture?" A human sense-maker usually hopes to make sense not only in physical gestures and correct use of language but by force of a valid hypothesis about what is going on. Success on this level depends on the world confirming what one proposes. The satisfaction associated with the success goes beyond the narrower self-realization of skill mastery; one is participating consciously in the realization of a larger system of beings—somehow hosting that larger action and event, confirming one's own security and power with the power of the whole. Grasping formal relationships among elements of actual experience and other remembered or projected elements, one gains the deeper satisfaction of the cognitive plenitude of "understanding." This level of success can be called full cognitive sense-making.

Full cognitive sense-making can be value-neutral in the sense that it is independent of many of our actual desires and judgments of desirability. But it is obviously not unrelated to our fundamental vital desire to go forward, to take the next step whatever it may be (a desire that intermittently boosts the momentum we always possess just in existing), and to be aware of other beings and the structures of situations. Thus an astronomer might make maximum cognitive sense in reporting to us that a huge meteor is about to strike the Earth, foreseeably destroying all life—and yet this information would strike us as stunning, nearly "senseless."

Sense is teleological or finalistic in at least these two ways, then: as involving the success and satisfaction of fulfilling a recognized, functionally

important diachronic compossibility (as in competent walking or talking), and as involving the success and satisfaction of relatively full cognitive realization. However, neither of these kinds of teleology contain the orientation question of meaningfulness and its answer, and so sense-making is always vulnerable to the uncontrollable, unforeseeable appearance of an appealing other being and to the uncontrollable, unforeseeable exigencies of forming an affirmable relationship with another being. The worst effect of the meteor news on my orientation may be not that it upsets my projections of future facts but that it promises to destroy all the beings to whom I am responsible. Similarly, the worst effect of a metaphysical disaster may be ethical rather than strictly cognitive. So there is a third, communicative finality of sense: it is inseparable from orientation issues, that is, from meaningfulness, insofar as a sense-maker is always succeeding or failing in making sense of a comportment toward others.

Some pragmatically oriented philosophies claim that important forms of sense are predetermined for us, belonging to our common sense or innate inclinations. For example, David Ray Griffin claims that it is part of our “hard-core common sense” that we understand our own normal actions as freely self-determined.⁶ It seems safer, however, to interpret all forms of sense, including basic-seeming forms of practical sense, as revisable works in progress rather than as immutable givens. After all, we find our rules of sense-making fundamentally changed as we grow out of childhood into adolescence and then into adulthood, and something comparable has manifestly happened on the cultural level in growing out of naïve animism, geocentrism, slaveholding, and patriarchy. We may have even more growing up to do.

Some anti-metaphysical schools of thought effectively equate sense-making with selfishness and violence, as though grabbing and using were the whole point of construal.⁷ This view is unbalanced. Consider a married couple who are facing the prospect of taking jobs in different cities. There will be no surprise if at least one of them says, “It doesn’t make sense for us to live apart.” Part of the construing sense cited here may lie in the social conventions of marriage (“What would people say?”); part of it may lie in desire for the daily satisfactions of living together and a secure order of things. But part of it is likely also to be a sense of responsibility for a relationship that can be upset. The sense of living together in marriage emanates from the meaningfulness of marital love. I generalize this point: divorce of sense from meaningfulness cannot be the norm.

The Metaphysical Kind of Sense

Some general kinds of sense—presumably many, if not all, of the important ones—have been strongly typed as genres: we say that a proposal does or does not make aesthetic sense, logical sense, scientific sense, economic sense, political sense, historical sense, or ethical sense. This allows us to alternate between different intellectual, volitional, and affective postures toward things, and to make provocative maneuvers—for instance, the moral realist move of saying “It is a fact that torturing children is wrong.” Although none of the recognized genres of sense are trouble-free, they all support seemingly useful practices, enhanced experiences, discourses rich in content, and interesting higher-order discussions of their success conditions. Some of them are very probably here to stay.⁸

Recognized sense is usually unchallengeable. I can no more doubt that a proposition I understand as a historical proposition has historical sense than I can doubt that I see trees outside my house. If, in the tree case, I were to discover that my perceptions are really of mirages, then of course I would cease to register them as tree *perceptions*; their orienting effect would no longer be that of finding myself in the vicinity of trees. Similarly, if I became convinced that all representations of the historical past are mirages, historical propositions would henceforth make sense differently by positioning me differently in the world—as a romantic daydreamer or storyteller, perhaps, rather than as a mindful inheritor of shared action.

Many suppose that something like this has happened to religious sense in the modern era because (a) religious claims make their traditional devout sense only if supernatural beings exist, and (b) a reasonable person can no longer believe that supernatural beings exist. On this view, while religious sense may indeed be *definable* so that people can still follow religious discourse, its devout sense-making can now only be a sham.

Metaphysical sense may be in that sort of predicament. In a landmark goodbye-to-metaphysics text of 1830, Comte argued that metaphysics is a halfway house in human intellectual evolution between archaic theological thinking, which wishfully imposes a personal, dramatic order on the experienced world, and modern “positive” scientific thinking.⁹ To say that the physical world is governed by Attraction and Repulsion, for example, is to make a summary explanatory move similar to recounting actions by Venus and Mars in a myth. But since empirical observation is the only substantial basis for explaining or predicting events in the world, mature thinkers recognize that the only substantial sense in talk of cosmic Prin-

ciples is derived from empirical generalizations. Like theology, metaphysics may have its own way forward within the charmed circle of a language game, but the way forward of real sense is the way of continuous learning from phenomena.

There is an important ambiguity here in the standard of “real sense.” I stated Comte’s claim as pertaining to sense because positivists characteristically wish to deny sense to transempirical discourses such as theology and metaphysics.¹⁰ They think there is a basic impracticability in the metaphysical way of relating to the world. But the world includes all possible referents, and the composition of the set of all possible referents is always subject to discussion. What if Comte’s program really consists of *preferring to* attend only to certain items in the world, namely, manipulable sense-observables, and not others, including what metaphysicians call intelligibles, such as Parmenidean being or Platonic forms?

Normally we confirm a proffered sense by moving forward in the indicated or implied way, whereas we confirm meaningfulness by deciding to retain or return to a position of addressing something in an affirmable relation. The thinker who finds metaphysics meaningful must be addressing something, then—something not seen, in that aspect, by positivists. But metaphysicians (other than atomistic materialists) have always had a scruple about claiming to address “something.” As long as the enemies of metaphysics have been denying that metaphysical propositions have any substantial referent, metaphysicians themselves have been struck by the need to represent the metaphysical intelligible as something other than a *thing*. Metaphysics has a different noetic and logical reach than ordinary naturalistic thinking geared to manipulable sense-observable objects. The sense of metaphysics depends on bearing this difference in mind. Metaphysical thinking takes up a sense challenge of picking its way forward without the empirical determinacy and testability of thing-reference. This same anti-reifying requirement of metaphysical sense seems to threaten the *meaningfulness* of metaphysics, since the normal scenario of meaningfulness is to be in the presence of an appealing Something in relation with which there is an affirmable and testable prospect of shared existence. Can metaphysics secure its meaningfulness only by betraying its sense, that is, by construing its intelligibles as things? Or is there a different, non-fatal way of connecting metaphysical sense with meaningfulness?

Metaphysics may be hostage to things in another way. While it is intellectually possible, and analytically elegant, to construe the world relationally, pure relationalism always arouses an intuitive revolt against dispensing

with substantial relata.¹¹ An infinite regress upon relations in answering “But what does the relation relate?” seems intolerable. The requirement that there be things to be related looks like one of the most basic requirements of sense-making. Moreover, it seems impossible to doubt that most of our thing identifications reflect realities of compossibility with at least rough accuracy. Yet our insistence upon a particular cast of characters in the world is, at its core, an obedience to meaningfulness. We are unwilling to look all the way past things to relations because we are practically invested in pursuing shared desirable existence with substantial beings; and just as we need things to capture and hold our attention, and to be the referents of our terms and the “owners” of “properties” we recognize, we need to understand these things as actors—and so as “possessors” of “powers”—to frame our dealings with them.

Despite the potentially devastating reevaluations metaphysics has received in the modern era, there is a persistent prospect of metaphysical sense. What is the nature of this prospect? If we trust the traditional categories we shall suppose it to differ from that of a scientific explanation, or a moral imperative, or a poetic flash of brilliance, or a religiously constrained gesture of awe. Metaphysical sense may be typed as a rational *elucidation* of how beings are, relieving or at least mitigating our deepest puzzlements about the consistency of being. When we reflect metaphysically we are striving for the fullest possible comprehension. The ideal of full comprehension is necessarily realist: we mean to place ourselves correctly so that we may *recognize* how beings *are* most completely and perfectly intelligible. We wish our own concept formation to be captured and shaped by a larger formation of beings, so that when we venture to make metaphysical sense by speaking of a “nature” or “essence,” we will be participating in and accurately attesting a real common formation of beings of a kind; when we speak of the “fundamental” or “universal” or “necessary,” we will be participating in and accurately attesting a real inescapability of formation, an integral whole-parts relation; and when we speak of one kind of being “transcending” another, we will be participating in and accurately attesting a real separateness. Metaphysical argumentation does not progress through purely ideal construction, like mathematical reasoning, but rather adjusts our most inclusive notions so that our participation and attestation seem really to work out and in all ways of interest we can go forward.

The inclusive theme of metaphysical elucidation is *being*. How does ontology begin?

The Parmenidean Topic of Being

Parmenides introduced the topic of intelligible being by specifying a “way”: “I will tell you . . . the only ways of enquiry that are to be thought of. The one, that [it] is and that it is impossible for [it] not to be, is the path of Persuasion (for she attends upon Truth); the other, that [it] is not and that it is needful that [it] not be, that I declare to you is an altogether indiscernible track.”¹² Addressing the grammatical strangeness in Parmenides’ indication of the metaphysical way, translator J. E. Raven comments: “What is the ‘[it]’ which our translation has supplied as grammatical subject to Parmenides’ verb *estin*? Presumably, any subject of inquiry whatever . . .”¹³ It seems that Parmenides is more interested in thinking inclusively about any and all matters, insofar as they are thinkable, than he is in thinking about “the universe” as the sum of existing things. If we wish to play off the title conventionally given his poem, “On Nature,” we might say that his claim relates not to Nature in the usual sense of the physically existent but rather to the general necessity of being able to think of “the nature of X” for any identifiable X. Using Parmenides’s phrasing, the “nature of X” question might be understood as “What is it impossible for X not to be?” That is, what is constitutive of X? But rather than the “nature” or “constitution” of any X it is probably better to stick to Parmenides’s own *estin* and render it with the widest scope as the “being” of any X.

What, then, is Parmenidean being? In its very slipperiness the question makes an excellent introduction to metaphysical sense. Parmenidean being cannot be an *entitative* “what” for two obvious reasons: (1) If being were an entity, we would need to be able to say what sort of entity it is, but any such specification would be absurd.¹⁴ (2) If being were an entity, we would perforce look beyond it to try to understand *how* it *is*, as other entities also *are*, and what we have in view, or at least are trying to see, in considering *that* it is. Let us then leave out the inserted “it”-subject of Parmenides’s original “is”-proposition—or follow Raven in associating with *estin* a generalized “it”-position to be taken by anything that “is”—and concentrate on being as commonly and necessarily shared by anything that “is,” or is anything, in the respect that it is, or is something—whether in the manner of present actuality (“X is very red”), already constituted reality (“X is a telephone booth”), or projected possibility (“X is useful”).

The grammatical gambit of the -ing word “being” construes being as action—an action anything might be the agent or patient of, the action

necessarily participated in by everything we can think of, necessarily already going on in some fashion whenever we address anything. In the -ing form, being occupies a grammatically ambiguous position intermediate between a sheer potential of action and a constituted product of action. To see the interest of this sense, consider how “running” is intermediate between “to run,” the potential for anyone to run—as in Sam asking himself, “Will I get a chance to run this afternoon?”—and an individuated action like “the run” that Sam has performed the last three afternoons. “Running,” unlike “to run,” not only might occur but does occur; unlike “the run,” however, it is not confined to certain instances. Terms like “running” have this freedom and scope just by our design, of course, but the design is well enough relatable to concrete referents that it seems a pertinent indication of their ultimate ontological context.

Whether we construe it as participle or gerund, in general the -ing form usefully expands our thought in several ways. Grammatically it allows actions and evaluations to take occurrences as their object, as in “I hated Sam’s running every afternoon,” and also lets the occurrence detach from any particular perpetrator: “I hate that obsessive running that Sam does.” For reflection, it allows the broadest survey of an area of occurrence. It invites examination of the structure of a kind of occurrence free of particular instances. The difference between saying “Sam ran by” and “Sam went running by” is that the -ing formulation frames contemplative comparisons, placing Sam in the large field of running actions, whereas “Sam ran by” moves us straight to the sequel.¹⁵ “Running” may be real, actual, or possible.

Parmenides’s proposal seeks this breadth and freedom with *estin*. Detaching *estin* from any subject, Parmenides surveys the manifold of “X is” and “X is Y” expressions in profound neutrality. He has no business committing to any claim of “X is” or “X is Y” form as supremely meaningful; if *estin* is meaningful, it is not so in the way that an object is. The point of focusing on *estin* is to transcend the limitations of beings—not to escape beings altogether, which is not possible, but to be present at the very start of their knowability, whatever shape their being might assume. Parmenides is best interpreted not as aiming upward, so to speak, toward some divine appellant by which we would be supremely smitten, but rather as aiming downward toward a supremely basic condition of sense in order to obtain the abstract satisfaction of clarifying the way to which there could be no alternative, the street of all traffic, the most basic positivity—how all that is, is.

Can this primal *sense* of being be appealingly *meaningful* in its own right? Could it provide a compelling direction in life? Not according to

the normal requirements of the situation of meaningfulness. Parmenidean ontology is logically supreme in a way, and intellectually appealing too, insofar as the act of surveying all “X is” and “X is Y” possibilities from this vantage point gives a thrill of exceptional all-inclusion akin to seeing the whole Earth from space. It places the comprehending mind in a desirable position. But it does not decide any issues of attention. It simply excludes ontological exclusion itself, showing that it cannot make sense to say that King Kong is not, for example, or that Kong’s being began at one time or ended at another. That is not to say that you will find Kong by traveling to an actual island, or that Kong is immortal. Negation of one circumstance or mode of being as a way of more clearly indicating another is often eminently sensible. What cannot be sensible is, on the one hand, fundamental negation (and, what comes to the same thing, evading the question for any thinkable X, “What constitutes X?”), or, on the other hand, ascribing the unconditional positivity of being—necessary, perfect, certain—to anything that does involve negation, such as facts which are to be distinguished from fictions, or the past which is to be distinguished from the future, or Sam whose runs differ from Ted’s. Parmenides’s own positivism works as a solvent against many forms of sophistry as well as against naïve ontologies of air or fire. It is a positivism diametrically opposite to Comte’s.

No doubt some will find the present interpretation too weak, preferring to draw from the Parmenidean proposal a thesis that being (or “Reality”) is uniquely one and eternal, with the corollaries that we ourselves are free of all limitation in the respect that we participate in being while we and everything else are insubstantial in every other respect. Indeed, Parmenidean monism can be a spiritually compelling position akin to the Advaita perspective on Brahman and maya, perhaps even convergent with it. But Parmenides’s analysis by itself does not compel us to conclude either that being is meaningful or that particular beings are not. If we decide that being is meaningful, we risk reifying and thereby falsifying it; if we decide that particular beings cannot be meaningful, we will lose touch with most if not all of our points of reference for living meaningfully, and the indiscriminating rumble of everything’s unquenchable being may become a horror.

If, however, with an eye on the *practical* significance of the inclusive generality of *estin*, we interpret Parmenidean ontology as an intellectual *accessory* to the directive affirmation of the meaningfulness of beings—if the “It is” is made the ontological motto of the orientation of welcoming and allying with any and all beings, an orientation requiring us to equip ourselves

to recognize them fully—then Parmenidean monism is turned inside-out and supports a rich pluralist manifold of meaningfulness.¹⁶

Metaphysical Sense and Meaningfulness

It may be suggested that we can speak of metaphysical sense not only as an attribute of propositions about being but as a subject's "sense for" the metaphysical situation. Bergson claimed that we can apprehend pure duration, the Bergsonian counterpart to Parmenidean being, in a mental act of metaphysical intuition different from ordinary discursive thinking.¹⁷ And Heidegger found the most authentic access to being first in uncomfortable moods of *Dasein* and later in a thinking he characterized as "thanking"—a matter of taking a radically receptive position of hearkening to being's unique transempirical appeal.¹⁸ It seems impossible, however, to separate a supposed intuitive acquaintance with being or appropriate attitude toward being from a properly metaphysical *understanding* of key propositions about being. It seems that claims made in any of these registers could be confirmed only in that same distinctively metaphysical way—that is, by exercising an intellectually advantageous freedom from particular objects and occasions while cognitively supporting understanding of anything that is.

Metaphysical sense goes beyond logical sense in purporting to reflect the comprehensibly real and actual as well as possible nature of things. But the thought of metaphysical acquaintance with being as a superior kind of acquaintance attached to a quasi-objective superior kind of being is one of the roads to metaphysical disaster. Metaphysics is perennially tempted to identify an extraordinary appellant for the sake of a great meaningfulness, and to grant the ultimate appellant an ultimate life-directing and fulfilling power. The sense of being able to go forward without intellectual handicap then merges with a sense of coming into the best Presence and relationship, the (misnamed) Form of the Good. The consistent *constative* affirmation of being articulated by metaphysical thought is taken as coinciding with a consistent *directive* affirmation of being that is a spiritual invitation, and may even be presented as an ideal narrative of following the great directive in an Ascent or Return of the mind. Alternatively, a sense of *not* being able to go forward, of an irresolvable intellectual questionableness, may be wrongly taken as decisive for the practical prospects of relationship. This conception of metaphysics as the governor of meaningfulness is dangerously confused. We can guard against that confusion and against practically catastrophic

metaphysical results like monism and determinism by working forward into metaphysics from our most basically assumed conditions of meaningfulness—conditions that are not purely intellectual and cannot be perfectly indiscriminating but rather reflect our living placement in an actual world stocked with medium-sized objects and stalked by fellow intenders. Or we can try to rectify metaphysical sense-making according to its own abstract exigencies, which runs a greater risk of estrangement from common sense but also promises to provide helpful critical leverage with respect to common sense. We can and should experiment with both approaches.

The usage I propose for the terms “sense,” “meaning,” and “meaningfulness” has its warrant in the philosophical quest for ultimately tenable assumptions about the being or import of anything rather than in the psychology of thought or communication. Ultimate assumptions cannot simply be pointed out—first philosophy cannot be done empirically or as a purely descriptive phenomenology—but must be formulated and negotiated while living under appeal and trial, by way of response to our world and each other. Our conception of being must accommodate our living thus.

I contemplate meaningfulness, then, from the standpoint of a relatively free being capable of being sufficiently directed, having something with import in view or in hand. By “relatively free being” I mean a determinable but self-organizing subjectivity—what you and I are. What counts as sufficient must depend on context. Sense is always requisite for meaningfulness; one cannot be sufficiently directed without having a recognizable way to proceed—except in the limit case of ambush by an amazing, uncategorizable appellant that demands a wholly new sense-making, or else a consummatory vision that transcends any sense-making since there is no further way to go forward with it. Defined, generally intelligible “meaning” is requisite as well, just insofar as being directed and being able to proceed depend on discrete, repeatable cognitive determinations. Perhaps meaning can be escaped: aesthetic or erotic adventures may be enjoyed as holidays from names and concepts (but then we spoil the effect by typing them as aesthetic or erotic). Still, the whole package of meaningfulness usually includes sense and meaning along with something enliveningly more that exceeds the bounds of syntax and semantics and so is located by linguistic theory in pragmatics.

The simplest case of sufficient direction is the capturing and retaining of a perceiver’s attention by a sufficiently interesting perceptible being. A flower, for example, is meaningful for me as its shapes and colors hold my gaze, its scent engages my smell, its texture tickles my fingers, and its

biological properties engage my reason. So long as I pay attention to it, I am willing to do so; in that sense there is a practical partnership between the image offered by the flower (the product of a history of natural selection for successful appeals) and my self-positioning (the product of a cultural development as well as a personal style). The *meaning* of the flower—primarily as an identifiable flower of a kind that humans talk about, secondarily as a flower I remember from childhood, a flower I could show my wife, and so on—connects the present being with other beings and circumstances in various ways, providing content for its meaningfulness; yet meaning in the sense of what is sayable about the flower evidently subserves the meaningfulness of the encounter with the flower, supposing that meaningfulness does obtain.

Momentary appeal cannot be the whole story of meaningfulness. I use the notion of appeal to account for a subject's willingly forming and staying in relationship with certain fellow beings, the very occurring of orientation, but we also wonder and care about what the relationship between the appellant being (and related beings) and the appellate subject-under-appeal (and related subjects) comes to. Even asking the present-tense question "What does the flower *mean*?" may be intended to get at the looking-back-from-the-future judgment of what it will have *turned out* to mean, given how the relationship with it held up. If I did show it to my wife, did it figure in that transaction as I thought it would? Did I make a correct surmise about its pollinator? Did the plant blossom again the following year? When we contemplate the career and impacts of the flower we go through a *trial* with it; insofar as we are alive to this, we are in a mode of *concern*. (With most things of our acquaintance we are already far along in trial.) The flower's appeal to a subject within a particular interval may not be in question, but its total participation in the world is. While attention is sufficiently directed by cogent appeal at any given moment, sufficient direction of understanding requires trial.

The trial aspect of meaningfulness is closely associated with its sense requirement. I am in a *kind* of encounter with the flower at hand: enjoying the garden, or looking for something for my wife, or studying pollination, or doing all of these things at once. I presume one or more of these ways forward. The most basic indicative-descriptive sense that the flower is *so*, possessing such-and-such a nature and placement, is on trial through its successive appearances and its duration, as are all aspects of its idealization (that it is an entity, a day lily blossom, yellow) and evaluation (one of my wife's favorites) and also the particular mix of these senses that I employ. But my sense of the shape and viability of the available ways forward depends on an