

CHAPTER 12 WHAT IS (REAL)?

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Chapter Objectives:

In this chapter you will look at what *IS*. This is not a topic we think about much (we just tend to pay attention to what we assume is real and ignore what we don't think is real). And there are lots of debates about this subject. Be prepared to do some thinking. After an introduction to

the field of metaphysics, you will review some of the key schools of thought in the history of thinking about being and reality. You will read some samples of the work of Aristotle, and some little bite-sized samples of others. After the survey of the various ways of thinking about reality, you will draw some of the insights together by reflecting on the nature of “experience.” Then you will then have a chance to apply the skills of philosophy to your own approach to reality. You will consider what it means to pay attention to reality, to ask questions about reality and to practice that reality. When you have finished studying this chapter you should be able to:

- Identify what “ontology” or “metaphysics” is all about.
- Summarize Aristotle’s basic understanding of being and cause(s).
- Describe what is meant by “substance” and an approach to reality view from the perspective of substance.
- Describe materialism, idealism, and dualism as three primary ways of looking at reality through a substance perspective.
- Name and briefly describe a few of the ways of looking at reality other than the substance approach.
- Show how one might look at reality from a more “experience” approach.
- Identify different kinds of reality
- Demonstrate how the skills of philosophy can be used to facilitate a wise living in according to reality using an example from your own life.

What is Metaphysics?

Let’s start with a practical exercise. Think of a time when . . .

1. You thought it was real but it wasn’t

Now consider this . . .

2. You think it is real now even though others don’t think so

So what did you think of? I have had students tell me that they thought Santa Claus was

real when he wasn't (but there really *was* a Saint Nicholas in Greece). I have had students tell me that they thought witches were real and learned that they weren't (yet I have also known a few students who called themselves "witches"). Some students have said that they thought dreams were real but they really aren't. Are dreams 'real'? What is *real*? I have had people tell me that they believe god is real now even though others don't believe it. Students have also told me they believe in evolution even though others don't. Is evolution 'real'? What is *real*? Or (taking it one step further), What *is*?

We bump into questions of reality all the time. Someone confides to you that they are being followed by the FBI and you wonder if they are having hallucinations. You have pains that the doctor can't identify and you wonder if it's not "all in your head." Your friend suffers a tremendous loss, but shows no emotion. You conclude that your friend is "in denial," not facing up the reality. You try to assess whether your child is *really* in trouble at school or whether it is mostly the teacher's inability to relate to your child. While the question of what is real seems like an awfully abstract question, we are surrounded with it constantly.

We have been exploring *wisdom* as a synthesis of experience in light of a careful reflection on the larger issues of life. We mentioned in chapter six that in one sense philosophy can be understood as an attempt to think and live according to the way things really are, to live in step with reality. Now, in this chapter, we finally turn toward a careful reflection of "the way things really are." Let's first consider the consequences of our investigation. Does it really make any difference what we believe about reality? "Reality" and "Being" may seem like very obscure terms. Consider, for example, a middle-aged man just beginning to sense some physical abnormalities. He feels weak here and there during the day. He finds himself urinating more than he used to. When he gets a cut it takes a long time to heal. He is thirsty. But none of these are "big" things. So he ignores them, "Not the spring chicken I used to be." And then he reads a poster about diabetes in the doctor's office while he is waiting for his mother. "Huh," he says. "The symptoms on that poster sound a lot like me. Maybe I ought to have some kind of examination." But he is a busy man and he just doesn't get around to it.

A few weeks later, however, after a couple of beers and no lunch or dinner (the beers were available at work; the meals were not), he came home feeling a bit funny. His mind was just not focused. He even had trouble walking. Now a couple of beers had never done this to him before. But things got worse. He was faint and his muscles started twitching a bit. Fortunately, his wife put the pieces of the puzzle together and realized that he was having an insulin reaction, a condition that results from overly low blood sugar. She gave him some orange juice and called the doctor. He was back on his feet soon and in the doctor's office as soon as they could set an appointment. And, sure enough, he was diagnosed with diabetes, and as he will testify, his life has never been the same since.

Is diabetes "real"? Well, to the man in our story, his failure to address the reality of diabetes could have cost him a great deal. At times, it may be "all in my head." At other times our head had better face the way things really are. What do we mean when we say that something is real?

Or consider the young couple, taking steps toward each other. There is interest; there is some chemistry; there is a lot in common. They have been in group situations and a few private "dates." So far so good. And in that last conversation they opened up more than ever. Both partners felt heard and understood by the other. "But," they ask themselves when alone, "is it love?"

Is love "real"? On the one hand, perhaps more songs are written about love these days than any other topic. And then there is the song that asks, "what's love got to do with it?" calling it a "second hand emotion." If love is simply some physiological response to particular forms of stimulation, perhaps we are better off ignoring any consideration of "love" in our relationships. But then again, what if love *is* real? What would that mean for this couple, for you and me? And how would we recognize it?

Or (finally) consider Epicurus. We have learned that Epicurus believed that "reality" is composed of nothing but atoms and the void. What *is* is simply atoms and void, period. Consequently, when we die, nothing "happens." Our atoms are diffused hither and thither and

that's it. No divine judgment, no life in a new body, nothing. Well, does Epicurus' belief in reality affect the way he lives right here and now? You bet it does. Epicurus, as we learned, did not consider the afterlife in his value system. No, it is simply a matter of maximizing the pleasure of this life right here and now, cuz there ain't nothing else. Pretty big consequences of our approach to the question of reality.

We tend to pay more attention to what we think is real. We tend to ignore that which we don't think is real. Have you ever thought about the word "illusion"? What is an illusion? What about a "hallucination"? What makes something a hallucination? There are a couple of wonderful quotes in the movie "A Beautiful Mind," a story about a brilliant mathematician (Nash) who suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. He has "seen" and "related to" hallucinatory people for some time, but learns to recognize them for what they are. At one point, Nash states, "I've gotten used to ignoring them and I think, as a result, they've kind of given up on me. I think that's what it's like with all our dreams and our nightmares. We've got to keep feeding them for them to stay alive." And later he confesses, "I still see things that are not here. I just choose not to acknowledge them. Like a diet of the mind, I just choose not to indulge certain appetites." Shankara, if you remember, thought the whole of the material world was illusion. Plato thought it was a world of shadows. We are better off, Shankara and Plato would claim, with our attention on spiritual or intellectual truth than on the shadowy mirage of this earth. So ask yourself, "What do I pay attention to in life?" "What is illusion to me?" "What is real?"

In this chapter we explore questions of being and reality, and in doing so we peek into a hornets' nest of terms and controversies: "Being," "is," "real(ity)," "entity," "things," "substance," "essence," "existence," "universal," "general," "noumena/phenomena," "metaphysics," "ontology," "being-there," "being-with," and "process," are only a few of the hot terms in metaphysics (indeed, these are only a few commonly discussed terms in the *West*). And, as you know by now, questions of reality and other philosophical questions are closely interrelated. It is hard to explore one question without bumping into another (how, for example, can you consider our descriptions of reality without also addressing the meaning of language?).

But for the most part in this chapter we will try to keep close to questions about reality and being, questions like:

- When we say that something *is* what do we mean?
- What things exist, really?
- Are there different *kinds* of being or reality?
- What is “being” or “reality” *like*?
- What *causes* things to appear as they are?
- What is the relationship between *permanence* and *change*?
- Is reality *one* or *many*?

These kinds of questions come under the heading of what is often called *ontology* or *metaphysics*.¹

Metaphysical thinking arises in the context of a number of different kinds of situations in life. We see stars--we appreciate their beauty displayed before us--and we begin to wonder, “Where do these lights come from, anyway?” We plot--how we could transform the world by running wires that send energy around, lighting up the insides of houses at night--and we are forced to examine more carefully, “Just what *is* electricity, anyway?” We are taught that Jesus’ body was transfigured on a mountain into a body of light and we find ourselves considering, “What kind of body turns into light, what was Jesus’ body *really* like?” Wonder, utility, religion. These are three important stimulants to inquiry about reality, both in the early development of philosophical discourse and in our own lives today.

Metaphysical thinking is also conducted in a variety of different ways. As you have learned, some of us tend to pay attention to the “in-here,” taking a more introspective approach to the methods and objects of metaphysics. Others are more “out-there” oriented, classifying things and designing experiments. Some think of the real as one, others as two, others as many.

1. Philosophers often include within “metaphysics” the discussion of more strictly “human” being: the relationship between mind and body, arguments regarding survival after death, consideration of the meaning of life itself and so on. I treat these and related issues in a separate chapter.

Some emphasize the spiritual/mental, others the physical. Some see permanence, others change. Different philosophers will tend to spend more time considering different categories of reality. Hence, by looking at reality through the eyes of a variety of philosophers, we begin to get a wider view ourselves. In this text we will look at reality from four different perspectives, each identified with a different single term and each of which offers unique lessons about the way things are.

Substance

Aristotle, Vaishesika, and the Framework of Metaphysics

The origins of philosophy in the West (in Greece) are normally described in terms of “cosmological” speculation. What this means is that many lovers of wisdom before Socrates wondered what the universe was made of: water, fire, atoms, or the like (you can see how this is a question of reality - “What *is* the world?”). On the one hand this might seem like a silly question: of course the world is made of different things (grass is grass and a cow is a cow). But what happens when the cow eats the grass? Does the grass “become” the cow? What happens when the cow dies? Does the cow “become” the grass? Liquid becomes both steam (gas) and ice (solid). Perhaps “water” is the substratum which underlies all different kinds of reality. But reality changes all the time. Perhaps “fire” (motion, transformation) is underneath it all. And so the discussion goes.

Thus the question of the material “stuff” of the earth soon led to a consideration of the relationship between permanence and change. Plato addressed this problem head-on with his notion of the Form. Plato regarded the material “stuff” of the earth to be transient and changing (grass turns into cow). Yet the idea or form of “cow,” persists through the entire changing life of the cow and through the lives of different cows. Similarly, the form of “The Good” outlasts various good teachers, good communities and entire cultures. For Plato, matter and form were

simply two different aspects of a single reality. One aspect (matter) was temporary and changing and the other (form) was eternal and unchanging.

It is not Plato, however, but his student Aristotle, that is usually credited with the foundation of metaphysics in the West. Aristotle's book entitled "metaphysics" was a collection of lectures which treats of the basic concepts of being and reality--and which happened to be located *after* (*meta* - means "after" in Greek) his study of "physics." Aristotle was convinced that those who tried to describe reality before him had failed (had not understood reality). True, Plato had developed a way of looking at reality that took into consideration both permanence and change. But reality was not really explained, Aristotle thought, because people had not explored "the most primary principles and causes." It was through his exploration of causes--through the single science of "being" which studies these causes--that Aristotle developed his notion of "substance," a way of looking at reality that has shaped Western philosophy for over two millennia. Let's listen to Aristotle as he lectures his students about these first principles and causes:²

In the excerpt below, Aristotle is thinking up a special "science" which deals with first principles (he calls these principles "substance itself," or "being *as* being"), while at the same time arguing for the necessity of a variety of specialized sciences to explore the various kinds of substances (geology investigates rocks, biology investigates life-forms . . .). On the one hand, it would seem natural to have separate sciences for different kinds of things with different kinds of causes (for example, psychological cause is much different than gravity). But how do we investigate not simply what it means for rocks or humans to "be" but for *anything* to be? What kind of science would pay attention to the characteristics of being in general? And precisely *what* would this scientist of being pay attention to? Read carefully as we follow Aristotle's presentation.

"But if there are several sciences of the causes, and a different science for each different

2. Excerpts taken from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Books II-VI.

principle, which of these sciences should be said to be that which we seek, or which of the people who possess them has the most scientific knowledge of the object in question [the science of being or substance]? The same thing may have all the kinds of causes, e.g. the moving cause of a house is the art or the builder, the final cause is the function it fulfills, the matter is earth and stones, and the form is the definition. To judge from our previous discussion of the question which of the sciences should be called Wisdom, there is reason for applying the name to each of them.

"There is a science which investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature. Now this is not the same as any of the so-called special sciences; for none of these others treats universally of being as being. They cut off a part of being and investigate the attribute of this part; this is what the mathematical sciences for instance do. Now since we are seeking the first principles and the highest causes, clearly there must be some thing to which these belong in virtue of its own nature. If then those who sought the elements of existing things were seeking these same principles, it is necessary that the elements must be elements of being not by accident but just because it is being. Therefore it is of being as being that we also must grasp the first causes. "

"There are many senses in which a thing may be said to 'be', but all that 'is' is related to one central point, one definite kind of thing, and is not said to 'be' by a mere ambiguity. Everything which is healthy is related to health, one thing in the sense that it preserves health, another in the sense that it produces it, another in the sense that it is a symptom of health, another because it is capable of it. And that which is medical is relative to the medical art, one thing being called medical because it possesses it, another because it is naturally adapted to it, another because it is a function of the medical art. And we shall find other words used similarly to these. So, too, there are many senses in which a thing is said to be, but all refer to one starting-point; some things are said to be because they are substances, others because they are affections of

substance, others because they are a process towards substance, or destructions or privations or qualities of substance, or productive or generative of substance, or of things which are relative to substance, or negations of one of these things of substance itself. It is for this reason that we say even of non-being that it is non-being. As, then, there is one science which deals with all healthy things, the same applies in the other cases also. For not only in the case of things which have one common notion does the investigation belong to one science, but also in the case of things which are related to one common nature; for even these in a sense have one common notion. It is clear then that it is the work of one science also to study the things that are, qua being. -But everywhere science deals chiefly with that which is primary, and on which the other things depend, and in virtue of which they get their names. If, then, this is substance, it will be of substances that the philosopher must grasp the principles and the causes.

As we mentioned, Aristotle is trying to invent a field of study for the most basic principles and causes, a way of studying reality itself. He states that some things may have “all the kinds of causes.” Aristotle identifies these “kinds” with an influential fourfold division (and philosophers after Aristotle have slightly altered the names which are presented here): (1) the material cause (“matter” - earth and stones), (2) the efficient cause (“moving cause” - art or builder), (3) the formal or essential cause (“the form” - the definition/blueprints), (4) the final cause (“final cause” - the function it fulfills - a home). Each of these, in its own way, “causes” the house to be what it is. Yes, the house is the stones, but it is also the *effect* or product of the builder’s work. It is also *this* house with a particular form. And it is also what it was *meant* to be, a home for someone. What *is* a house? To answer the question, one must consider a variety of causes.

Now ask, “What *is* a ‘war’?” Some will answer with an account of the historical development leading to some kind of conflict (efficient cause). Others will speak of the use of weapons (material cause). Military specialists might distinguish particular characteristics of “war” as opposed to “rebellion,” giving precise stages and patterns of action (formal cause). Still

others might talk about what war *means* to the families or in terms of some larger perspective (final cause).

Now ask once again, “What *is* a human person?” Are we a collection of muscles and skin and such (material cause)? Are we a product of our parents intercourse, or of evolutionary process, or divine creation (efficient cause)? Are humans a composite of thought, feeling, willing (formal cause)? Are we members of humanity, rulers of the earth, or the image of the divine (final cause)? As you can tell, Aristotle is on to something. It is hard to grasp what *is*, what is real, without exploring the relationships between various kinds of causes.

Ultimately Aristotle settles on the term “substance” as the focus of attention for the science of metaphysics. In the next “book” of his *Metaphysics* Aristotle goes on to provide definitions for a number of key terms related to this special science: “beginning,” “cause,” “element,” “nature,” “necessary,” “one,” “potency,” “quality” and so on. In order to get a better feel for his understanding of substance, let us look at his definition both of “substance,” and of “accidents.”

"We call 'substance' (1) the simple bodies, i.e. earth and fire and water and everything of the sort, and in general bodies and the things composed of them, both animals and divine beings, and the parts of these. All these are called substance because they are not predicated of a subject but everything else is predicated of them.-(2) That which, being present in such things as are not predicated of a subject, is the cause of their being, as the soul is of the being of an animal.-(3) The parts which are present in such things, limiting them and marking them as individuals, and by whose destruction the whole is destroyed, as the body is by the destruction of the plane, as some say, and the plane by the destruction of the line; and in general number is thought by some to be of this nature; for if it is destroyed, they say, nothing exists, and it limits all things.-(4) The essence, the formula of which is a definition, is also called the substance of each thing.

"It follows, then, that 'substance' has two senses, (A) ultimate substratum, which is no longer

predicated of anything else, and (B) that which, being a 'this', is also separable and of this nature is the shape or form of each thing.

...
 "'Accident' means (1) that which attaches to something and can be truly asserted, but neither of necessity nor usually, e.g. if some one in digging a hole for a plant has found treasure. This-the finding of treasure-is for the man who dug the hole an accident; for neither does the one come of necessity from the other or after the other, nor, if a man plants, does he usually find treasure. And a musical man might be pale; but since this does not happen of necessity nor usually, we call it an accident. Therefore since there are attributes and they attach to subjects, and some of them attach to these only in a particular place and at a particular time, whatever attaches to a subject, but not because it was this subject, or the time this time, or the place this place, will be an accident. Therefore, too, there is no definite cause for an accident, but a chance cause, i.e. an indefinite one. Going to Aegina was an accident for a man, if he went not in order to get there, but because he was carried out of his way by a storm or captured by pirates. The accident has happened or exists,-not in virtue of the subject's nature, however, but of something else; for the storm was the cause of his coming to a place for which he was not sailing, and this was Aegina.

"'Accident' has also (2) another meaning, i.e. all that attaches to each thing in virtue of itself but is not in its essence, as having its angles equal to two right angles attaches to the triangle. And accidents of this sort may be eternal, but no accident of the other sort is.

 Aristotle is interested in exploring being *as* being. His interest here is not simply in the classification of "beings," but rather--more fundamentally--to examine what it means simply to "be." For this reason Aristotle felt it was important to pay attention to the thing itself (which "*is*" as itself) rather than the changing qualities of the thing. This "thing itself" he calls "substance." The substance of the house is the individual house. The substance itself--the house--does not

change. It is always a house until it is destroyed. The “accidents” are those qualities which can change over time in a single house or change from house to house (color, size and so on). Aristotle defines “substance” as a stable center of change, as a substratum of attributes or qualities (grammatically - as a subject of predicates), as a concrete or self-existent or independent individual, or as an “essence.” A given substance is composed of both changing matter and unchanging form, conditioned by the dynamics of efficient and final causes.

If we were to read further, we would discover that the unchangeable Form is ultimately the object of Aristotle’s investigation. Like Plato, Aristotle is interested in the connection between ‘being’ and that which does not change. But for Aristotle, unlike Plato, the form does not reside “apart” from the individual, but rather is inseparable from the individual substance. We abstract the form from the particular substance through observation and reason. When the naturalist watches a number of birds, for example, he begins to recognize that which links them together into different species. In doing this he abstracts their “form” from the particular birds themselves (their “accidental” character). But the form inheres only in *this bird*. For Aristotle, reality is about things, about stuff. Yes, it is about the changing and especially the unchanging elements of stuff, but from Aristotle forward, philosophers have often had a tendency to think of reality in terms of “things,” “stuff,” what is “out there.” In this way, by the use of such concepts as “cause,” “substance,” “accidents,” “form” and the like, Aristotle, was able to formulate a “science” of being sufficient to set the course of Western philosophical discussion for more than two thousand years.

In the East, the Nyaya and Vaisesika schools of Indian philosophy explored reality in a similar manner.³ Just as questions of stability/change and cause/effect shaped the emergence of Western philosophy, so similar questions--again, in the contexts of natural wonder, utility, and religion--stimulated metaphysical speculation in India. The Nyaya-Vaisesika philosophical

3. Dating the schools of philosophy in India is notoriously difficult. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore date the *Vaisesika Sutra*, a key document of one of these schools, not later than 300 bce. See *Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds, A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 386.

schools approached the questions of reality with an “out there,” orientation. Their interest-- Nyaya developing a system of logic and Vaisesika developing a system of metaphysics-- was in the observation and classification of particular individuals. By such a classification, these Indian philosophers concluded they could come to know what it means to say “this is,” and hence they could order their lives according to that reality.

The Nyaya-Vaisesika school classifies the objects of reality (*padartha* - that which can be thought or named) in terms of six primary categories: substance, quality, activity, generality, particularity, and inherence. Later a seventh category (non-existence) was added. The central Vaisesikan category is *substance*. Substance is seen as (1) a locus of qualities and actions, (2) a substratum of change, and (3) capable of independent existence. Thus, for Vaisesika, what is most real is the individual, nameable existent, described by particular qualities, undergoing change, capable of existence apart from something else. You can see the similarities to Aristotle’s system.

Epicurus, Carvaka, and Materialism

Like I said, after Aristotle in the West (and in the context of thought like the Nyaya-Vaisesika schools in the East), many looked at reality in terms of unchangeable substance, the “stuff” of the universe. All well and good. “But,” you might ask, “just what *is* this substance, this unchanging element that makes individual reality (the thing) what it is in the midst of all its change?”

For Epicurus, as we have learned, the substance of the earth is atoms and the void, or “bodies and space.” Remember what he said?

Further, the whole of being consists of bodies and space. For the existence of bodies is everywhere attested by sense itself, and it is upon sensation that reason must rely when it attempts to infer the unknown from the known. And if there were no space (which we call also void and place and intangible nature), bodies would have nothing in which to be and

through which to move, as they are plainly seen to move. Beyond bodies and space there is nothing which by mental apprehension or on its analogy we can conceive to exist.

For Epicurus, the unchanging substance of reality are the infinite little atoms and the void within which they exist. What changes is the *configuration* of these atoms. Each configuration produces a different kind of thing (rocks, plants, water, vapors, souls).

In the India, the Carvakan school of philosophy held similar views. The Carvaka (their beginnings dating from earlier than 500bce) take interest in the particular and the many to the extreme. Rejecting the authority of the Vedic literature, the religious authorities, and reason or inference itself, this school of thought promotes a metaphysical doctrine called “Lokayata,” meaning that only this world (*loka*) exists, and that there is no beyond (yes, this sounds a bit like Epicurus). As with Epicurus, Carvaka believes that particular objects of perception are the only real. Hence “souls” are only the temporary modifications of material within human bodies. There is no future life, no reincarnation, for at death, the elements are dissolved.

Central to the Carvakan approach is a thorough critique of logic and knowledge. Carvaka (again, like Epicurus) allows only sense perception as a legitimate form of knowledge. Perception, in turn, does not give sufficient warrant to identify such things as “causes” or “necessary and universal connections.” Inference (and especially deductive reasoning) is dependent upon such notions. Consequently, these forms of reasoning are rejected and we are left simply with the perceptions of our senses and a life lived in harmony with the things we see before us here and now. As you can see, the question of metaphysics (what is real) is intimately connected with the question of knowledge (how do we know what is real).

Shankara, Plato, and Idealism

While Epicurus and Carvaka saw unchanging substance, the true “stuff” of the universe, in terms of the “many,” Plato and Shankara saw the real in terms of the “One.” Indeed, Shankara--and the Advaitan Vedanta school of metaphysics which follows him in India--sees the

origin of both the “out there” and the “in here” in a single, ineffable, pure consciousness:

Brahman. For Advaitan metaphysics, *Brahman* is the single most-real Real. The world of the material is a world of change, a world of mistaken knowledge, a world of mere names, a world of impermanence. *Brahman* is unchanging, is self-existent, is consciousness, is the only authentic substance, the only true cause. The experienced world is--when understood in terms of its most real reality--a momentary manifestation of *Brahman*.

If you turn to your excerpt from Shankara’s commentary on the *Brahma Sutra* in chapter 3, you will remember that it is a discussion of the notions “cause” and “effect,” notions which some (like the Vaisesika school) defended, others (like the Carvaka school) denied, but which Shankara (and the Advaitan school more generally) wanted to clarify. Shankara argues for the ultimate identity (“non-difference”) of cause and effect. He defends his position both scripturally and logically. Just as the pot has its origin in clay, and is *really* clay, so the manifold world has its origin in *Brahman* and is *really Brahman*. Like the mirage--or like the rope mistaken for a snake--there is the appearance of effects, but the truth lies in the unreality of all effects. The pot *is* clay, the mirage *is* sand, the imagined snake *is* rope. All the universe has its “reality” in *Brahman* alone. When we look most deeply within we see only *Brahman*. When we look most clearly without we see only *Brahman*. As Shankara writes,

This doctrine of the individual self having its Self in *Brahman*, if once accepted as the doctrine of the Veda, does away with the independent existence of the individual self, just as the idea of the rope does away with the idea of the snake (for which the rope has been mistaken). And if the doctrine of the independent existence of the individual self has to be set aside, then the opinion of the entire phenomenal world--which is based on the individual self--having an independent existence is likewise to be set aside.

For the Advaitan, meticulous classification of the “out there” and concern with the details of our material existence, are not so much wrong as mistaken. We grasp the reality of individuals not so

much in considering them as independent “beings,” but rather as thoroughly dependent manifestations of Supreme Being. When we realize this, we are freed from connection with illusion and materiality and unite ourselves with pure consciousness/spirit, which is who we are *really* anyway.

Plato presents a similar approach. The world of things is a world of shadows, only vaguely presenting a sense of reality, and subject to constant change. It is only when we ascend (through much effort) out of the cave and into the light of the Sun--and indeed, only truly when we look upon the Sun itself--that we catch a glimpse of reality as it truly is. Reality is only understood in the context of the Ultimate Form which gives it all meaning.

Descartes, Samkhya, and Dualism

There are, however, those who argued that the unchanging substance of the universe is not in one form only (either spirit or material), but rather is present in two forms: both material and spiritual. Both matter and spirit (also called “mind” and “body”) are fundamental building blocks of reality. Both exist from the beginning of the world. The “stuff” of the world is made up of the combination of these two primary substances. This position is called *dualism*. René Descartes argued for a metaphysical *dualism*, claiming that there were essentially two kinds of substance: mind and matter, each of which could influence the other. Descartes writes,

V. Everything in which there resides immediately, as in a subject, or by means of which there exists anything that we perceive, i.e. any property, quality, or attribute, of which we have a real idea, is called a *Substance*; neither do we have any other idea of substance itself, precisely taken, that it is a thing in which this something that we perceive which is present objectively in some of our ideas exists formally or eminently. For by means of our natural light we know that a real attribute cannot be an attribute of nothing.

VI. That substance in which thought immediately resides, I call *Mind*. I use the term ‘mind’ here rather than ‘spirit,’ as spirit is equivocal and is frequently applied to what is corporeal [the term *esprit* in French can refer to breath, wind, air -].

VII. That substance which is the immediate subject of extension in space and of the accidents that presuppose extension, e.g. figure, situation, movement in space etc., is called *Body*.

. . . But now, substances that can exist apart from each other are really distinct. But mind and body are substances that can exist apart from each other. Hence there is a real distinction between mind and body.⁴

In India, the Samkhya and Yoga schools are perhaps the best examples of a kind of dualism, although whereas the other schools so far have tended to look at reality in terms of the “unchanging” self-existent substance, Samkhya sees substance/reality itself as a developing interplay of forces.

Samkhya philosophers’ understanding of reality begins with a fundamental distinction between

prakrti (lifeless body, matter, mere object), and

purusa (life-reality, spirit, self).

Prakrti-- a lifeless potentiality--is itself subject to three fundamental forces: consciousness, activity, and resistance. Left to itself, *prakrti* is inert. It is the power of *purusa*, acting somewhat as a magnet does upon iron, which stimulates *prakrti* into motion/being. It is the union of *purusa* and *prakrti* which generates reality as we ordinarily experience it. From this union, universal--and then individual--mind is formed, and from individual mind are formed the particular faculties of mind (operations of perception and action, for example), and the elements of the world (both subtle elements which are the inner counterparts of our senses, and the gross

4. René Descartes, “The Philosophical Works of Descartes,” trans. Elizabeth S. and Roxx Haldane, G.R.T. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 53,59.

elements of ether, air, fire, water, earth). The influences of consciousness, activity and resistance upon *prakrti* stimulated by *purusa* produces a constantly re-forming reality.

Existence, Process . . .

In the West debates raged between idealists, materialists and dualists during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with no position “winning the day.” Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) offered a profound critique of the assumptions about knowledge that lay behind much of the metaphysical speculation of his day (as we saw in our chapter on knowledge), and after Kant many despaired of knowing reality. Some settled in to a scientific micro-reality, only accepting as real what is rooted in scientific “fact” and clear logical presentation. Others, like G. F. Hegel, following another aspect of Kant’s analysis, opted for a grand system of Idealism, with a universal Spirit as the single unfolding reality manifest in history.

Ultimately people began to question the basic presuppositions of Western metaphysical speculation. Was the project of *building a comprehensive rational account of reality based upon indubitable foundational principles wherein “reality” or “being” is understood as independent, unchanging, substance* really a proper aim? Were we really getting at *reality* by approaching it in this manner? While hints of these questions were present as early as Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), and were more developed by the existentialist philosophers of Europe, it was not until the later part of the twentieth century that a fully “postmodern” metaphysical expression has developed its own voice in the West. Concerns have been expressed regarding every aspect of the modern metaphysical project.

Some have questioned the possibility of a *comprehensive rational account* of reality. Contemporary philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard, for example, questions the whole notion of a “meta-narrative” enveloping the whole, seeing humankind rather as trapped within local narratives. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and North American philosophy in general has always been somewhat critical of the possibilities of reason, preferring to emphasize the role of will or

feelings. Are there aspects of the real we miss entirely by attempting a “comprehensive rational” account. Emmanuel Levinas takes it one step further. He suggests that the whole enterprise of metaphysics has been mistaken due to the need to unite [read “control”] diversity into a synthetic *whole*. By failing to pay attention to otherness and difference in our effort to synthesize reality, we lose what is perhaps the most fundamental characteristic of reality.

Others question the modern principles of *indubitable foundational principles*. Some, like Richard Rorty, argue that all attempts to construct a system of verification based on foundational principles have failed. We must instead construct a new kind-of pragmatism. Others such as Michel Foucault and representatives of feminist philosophy argue that our “foundational principles” are often a reflection, not of academic neutrality, but rather of political commitments consciously held or deeply ingrained in cultures. Still others re-introduce religious beliefs as foundational principles which they feel were rejected by the modern philosophical culture.

Finally, there are those who question the notion (since Aristotle) of *independent, unchanging substance*. It was Martin Heidegger and the “existentialists” who began to speak of “existence before essence.” Reality is not matter and form extended in space, but rather the lived dynamism (*existence*) of what arises. Just as Hegel suggested a move forward with his idea of a “concrete logic,” in North America, Charles S. Peirce and Josiah Royce (1855-1916) pursued a “logic of relations” which emphasized interdependency rather than independence as a condition of being. And then there are the “process thinkers” like Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) which have tried to rethink metaphysics through the window of *process* rather than substance as the fundamental principle of reality. There are many who are suggesting, from one perspective or another, that the whole assumption of reality--as rationally grasped, unchanging, independent *substance*--has to go. Nonetheless, there is no knowing where all this rethinking will lead. The course of Western reflection on being and reality is at a critical juncture, and only time will tell.

Nothing

In India, doubts about developing an adequate account of reality through the perspective of substance (by looking at reality as stuff or things) appeared early. In the East one finds a competing set of perspectives through which reality is comprehended, with the substance approach being only one of many. We have already seen how the Vaisesika, Advaitan Vedanta, Carvaka, and Samkhya schools understand substance. Vaisesika understands substance as (1) a locus of qualities and actions, (2) a substratum of change, and (3) capable of independent existence. Carvakan metaphysics understands reality to be the stuff of material things. Advaitan metaphysics grasps substance in terms of the above three characteristics (with *Brahman* as the “true” Being of things), but in doing so interprets (for example) human existence as thoroughly *dependent*. The Samkhya (dualist) school questions the idea of substance as being a “substratum of change.” For the Samkhya, earthly reality is not that which is subject to change, but rather is itself changing always. We have not summarized the Buddhist metaphysics yet. The Buddhist questions the notion of substance entirely.⁵

First, Buddhism understands the way things are in terms of a profound and thoroughgoing *interdependence*. Listen to this excerpt from an account of the Buddha’s enlightenment:

Then, as the third watch of that night drew on, the supreme master of trance turned his meditation to the real and essential nature of this world: ‘Alas, living beings wear themselves out in vain! Over and over again they are born, they age, die, pass on to a new life, and are reborn! . . . He then surveyed the twelve links of conditioned co-production,

5. Buddhism itself can be further divided into “realist,” “idealist” and other such schools of thought. Indeed, there was probably greater philosophical diffusion in the history of Buddhism than in Hinduism. Some of this history, however, takes us out of India and complicates matters more than needed in this text. My aim here will be simply to present a summary of some of the central features of Buddhist metaphysics as distinct from the schools of thought treated above. For a history of Buddhist philosophical inquiry see David J. Kalupahana, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities*, reprint, 1992 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1994).

and saw that beginning with ignorance, they lead to old age and death, and beginning with the cessation of ignorance, they lead to the cessation of birth, old age, death, and all kinds of ill. . . . From the summit of the world downwards he could detect no self anywhere. Like the fire, when its fuel is burnt up, he became tranquil. . . . For seven days He dwelt there - his body gave him no trouble, his eyes never closed, and he looked into his own mind. He thought: 'Here I have found freedom', and he knew that the longings of his heart had at last come to fulfillment. Now that he had grasped the principle of causation, and finally convinced himself of the lack of self in all that is, he roused himself again from his deep trance, and in his great compassion he surveyed the world with his Buddha-eye, intent on giving it peace."⁶

When Gautama Shakyamuni (the Buddha's earthly name) set his mind on the "real and essential nature of this world," he finds himself surveying the twelve links of "conditioned co-production" (also translated "conditioned-genesis," "dependent co-origination" and other similar phrases). What is involved in his reflection on these "links" is a conclusion that all reality is *absolutely interdependent*. The statement made is that the Buddha "grasped the principle of causation," namely that there is no truly independent reality. All and every reality arises in a simultaneous mutually conditioned "cause."

Likewise reality is essentially *impermanent*. This "leads to" that. There is no stable unchanging "being" to point to in order to say, "*this* is real." The moment you point to it, it is something different. You can claim, for example that this physical thing has a given extension in space, but only for a time. You can argue, for example that the idea of a thing remains even then the physical item does not, but the Buddha will tell you about the causes of the ideas in the mind and of their changing and passing away.

6. "The Acts of the Buddha" (*Buddhacarita*) by Ashvaghosha, twelfth canto, cited in Edward Conze, ed., trans, *Buddhist Scriptures* (London, New York: Penguin Books, 1959), 50–52.

Consequently, there is no real “self,” no substratum of change, no *substance* to “be.” The doctrine in Buddhism is called *an-atman*. Whereas Hinduism and other philosophical schools held to the belief in an *atman*, an individual self which persists over time (whether this be a human or an inanimate ‘self’), Buddhism denied the existence of such a self. Buddhism stresses impermanence to the extreme.⁷

Thus what one might call a self or substance (and especially a human self) is not a “locus of qualities” but only a momentary configuration of perceived elements (often called the five *skandha*: matter, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness). The point is, there is no “locus.” There is only the reality of the absolute present, conditioned by the past and forming the future (so it appears). Buddhist philosophy is essentially a reaction against the whole notion of substance. It is our attachment to substance (and all that follows from this attachment) that has brought us so much suffering. Our salvation and release come not from, for example, the realization of the fundamental identification of *Atman* with *Brahman*, but rather in the realization that ***there is no Atman at all***.

This brings us to the Buddhist approach to *nothing*. It is one thing to reflect on reality as “being” as “stuff” as “substance” out there. It is quite another to reflect on reality as a temporary configuration of Absolute Nothingness. You are probably aware that just as Western painting fills the canvas with “stuff,” so Japanese painting leaves a great deal of empty space on the canvas. Emptiness is important in Japan. We mentioned this in chapter 6, when we considered the thought of Kitaro Nishida regarding action-intuition. One of Nishida’s primary ideas is his notion of “absolute nothingness.” He writes, of this idea:

The self, consciousness of absolute nothingness

This is the religious experience in which form is seen as void and void as form, i.e., the

7. In Indian philosophy there was a distinction between *Sat*-cosmogony (emphasizing permanence) and *Asat* cosmogony (emphasizing impermanence). Early Buddhism can be clearly placed in the *Asat* side of this continuum.

state in which there is neither a seer nor that which is seen.

Internal life

When the self-consciousness of absolute nothingness determines itself, its noematic plane [the world out there] is the topos [place] of the final universal that determines all that exists, and in its noetic direction [the world in here] we find the flow of infinite life. At this point one might question how absolute nothingness can possibly determine itself. In reply it must be stated that absolute nothingness is not simply not, being, anything but is rather the ultimate noetic determination; it is the essence of spirit. It is both absolute nothingness and absolute being, and as such transcends the limits of our understanding. This is the very origin of the question.⁸

Just think about this for a while.

Experience

We have now looked at reality from a few different perspectives. In the process we have been introduced to a number of different questions and schools of thought. As you can see, each generation, each location, each person confronts “being” as they see it then and there. The question asked one hundred years ago is not quite the same question when asked today. The term used to identify a key concept is not the same term when translated into a different language. And that translation changes the concept. And yet *being* still pours down upon us from all sides. Mysterious, but obvious. We still feel hunger when we are without food. Birds still sing. Our own thoughts and longings and questions arise and fall, moment by moment by moment. Whether we have reality figured out or not, we deal with reality day in and day out. But before we examine our own practice of reality, let’s summarize what we might learn from this initial

8. Kitaro Nishida, “General Summary,” in *The Logic of Nothingness: A Study of Nishida Kitaro*, Robert J.J. Wargo (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 207.

peek at the philosophical discussion about reality using another perspective: the perspective of “experience.”⁹

The Diversity of Experience

“Experience” is not quite the same as “substance.” Experience is not unchanging, for example, but it does have stable elements. A rock’s experience of gravity is nearly the same every time it falls down. My experience of my wife encompasses both the continuity and the changes in our relationship. Something comes within range of us and we say that it “enters” our experience (as when we see something, or begin a relationship). Sometimes we speak of “having” an experience. Certain things come together and that entire event we call “an experience” that we have “had.” But we can take another step further. We can think of “being” an experience. In this sense we “are” the coming together of things (so also rocks, molecules, and plants are a coming-together of things). Looking at reality through the window of experience offers a way of pulling together some of the lessons we learn from metaphysical speculation.

One of the first lessons we learn is that *the reality of experience comes in different kinds*. “Things” are part of experience. A deer runs across the road in front of my car and I slam on the brakes. The deer is part of my experience. I cut a tulip stem from a plant. I am part of the plant’s experience. Molecules, plants, deer, people--all that philosophers might include as “extended” material--these are all part of experience. And indeed, they each are particular experiences in their own right. Things are real.

But so are “states of affairs.” Diabetes is real. Just as the deer is a configuration of various elements having effect upon other elements (my car, for example), so diabetes is a configuration of elements having effect upon other elements (my health). “Diabetes” is not just a name for things present here and there in a certain way. Diabetes identifies a state of affairs which has an experience all its own and which can participate in my own experience, though it is

9. The use of “experience” as a window of metaphysical speculation is common among philosophers from the North American tradition.

a different kind of reality than a “thing.” And we might think of other states of affairs which have a similar kind of reality (leisure, transition, love).

“Ideas” participate in experience as well. Everything has some way of coding information. Atoms respond to positive and negative charges. Plants sense the presence of the sun. People talk. Each of these involves a framework of interpretation. This framework of interpretation is often called “mind” or “spirit.” Mind, spirit, ideas have their own way of participating in experience. My sense of “wrong,” for example, shapes my approach to stealing. A couple may spend hours deciding whether they should “date” or not, clarifying just what each means by the idea. Needless to say, whatever the word means, the *idea* contributes to each of their experience. “Mind” or “spirit” can be seen as a source or a composition of ideas, having an even stronger influence in experience.

We can even think of “possibilities” have possessing a kind of reality in experience. The fact that I stand there at the buffet, with all that range of foods looking me in the face, and in five minutes I will fill my plate with only just so much--*this* is reality. I “am” my possibilities. A tulip does not have the possibilities I have. That is, in part, what makes a tulip what it is. Think of your career. It is one thing to choose a career, to say “Yes” to this or that path. But we only say “Yes” in the context of a number of “Nos”. Think of the man who chooses elementary school teaching when he could have been working serving at a coffee shop. Now think of the man who chooses elementary school teaching when he could have been an executive in an investment corporation. There is a sense in which we are what we say “no” to. Possibilities are real, and really shape experience. Even “nothing” is a real possibility.

Here you have a sampling of the different kinds of reality involved in experience. So, what is real? From the viewpoint of experience, lots of things are real. The idealist, the materialist, even the Buddhist, all have something to contribute to experience. The reality of experience comes in different kinds.

The Complexity of Experience

Because the reality of experience comes in different kinds, it is actually quite complicated. I have described experience as a “coming together” of things. By speaking of the “coming together” we are talking about cause, and about relationship, and about influence. Rather than thinking of reality as absolutely independent substance, looking at reality through the window of experience points to the mutual interdependence of reality. Already in Aristotle we noted that we cannot speak about “what is,” without speaking in terms of different causes (formal, material, efficient, and final). Likewise Buddhist philosophy developed a highly sophisticated analyses of causes. And when we address “cause,” we are compelled to think of relationships (this causes that; this is in relationship somehow with that), and with influence, power, and change (this changes this, a first and a second thing arising together in such a way influences the character of a third thing). Consider, for example, the world of nutrition. In just this small piece of experience we must take into consideration inherited predispositions, personal history, diet, exercise, stress, and more. The reality of reality is this: a number of factors mutually contribute to the nature of experience. Some factors have greater stability (more like “substance”). Some factors are quite fluid (more like “process”). Sometimes we look at the whole and think of experience as “One.” At other times we look at the factors or elements and think of experience as “Many.” The whole and the many each participate and co-create experience. It is simply complex.

Sensitivity to Experience

Which means that we learn to relate to experience,--to reality--not generally through simple rational or scientific “explanations,” but through an ever-growing sensitivity to the way things are. There are a few kinds of reality (some “things,” for example) that arise in experience in such a way (with a certain kind of force, with repeatable similarity, with a similarity to other’s experience) that their nature can be described with greater confidence (“objective” perhaps?).

Other elements of experience remain essentially hidden to all but ourselves (our dreams, for example). The art of relating to the fullness of experience involves developing a sensitivity to the different kinds of reality and their interrelationships.

Practice

The love of wisdom (learning to respond with all our resources to the fruit of a careful evaluation of life, of the way things really are) involves attention, inquiry, and practice with regards to the honest complexity of it all. We have been reviewing the philosophical *discussion* of being, but we could ask another question. What might philosophy as the *love of wisdom* look like with regards to reality? How might a “way of life” be informed by our survey of metaphysical speculation? Perhaps we could be even more specific. How might our reflection on the larger issues of life--in particular, our review of metaphysical discussion--assist us here and now: faced with uncertain medical conditions (what is really wrong), personal suffering (what is the character of being), or questions about how to care for our children (what is really the case)? Perhaps we can apply the *skills* of wisdom to the *questions* of wisdom.

Paying Attention to Being

First, we pay attention. No, first we stop. That is the first--and sometimes the hardest--part of paying attention. How can we stop when faced with uncertainty, suffering or *this* child? But we will not pay attention, we will not begin to see reality in *this* situation right here and now until we stop long enough to let reality come to us and to let ourselves be present with reality. So the first step is to stop.

Then we identify the object of our attention. On the one hand this might seem simple: it is this medical condition, this suffering, this child. But when we are honest we realize that it is much larger. It is also *my* reaction to this uncertain medical condition. It is *my family's* participation in this situation. It is not just our suffering, but our suffering *in the context of* faith in God. It is not just *this* child, but a whole network of relationships encompassing individuals,

institutions and culture itself. Pay attention to all the factors, to the different kinds of reality present. As we look at our object of attention, certain aspects usually rise to the top.

Next we eliminate distractions. The school counselor labeled my child. Perhaps my obsession with proving/disproving this label is really distracting me from paying attention to my child, to the full reality of who my child *is*. Just as with the history of Western metaphysics, there will be seasons of deconstruction (getting rid of false ways of looking at reality). Perhaps we have always looked at medical problems in terms of some kind of “problem” that someone else could “fix.” But now we realize that this perspective was all wrong, even a distraction from really paying attention.

And we admit that it is *we* who are paying attention. And each of us has our own (fallible) ways of paying attention. Some are out-there oriented, others are in-here oriented. We must face this, for reality is inseparable from our construction of reality. Having looked at our object of attention we also realize that this kind of object might require certain kinds of awareness. Perhaps attention to an uncertain medical condition might require a detailed observation of activities and symptoms (focused and alert). Perhaps consideration of our child would require some time of quiet, open reflection, allowing ourselves to “muse” about our child, remembering this and that in a loose, free sort of way. And of course, different *kinds* of reality involved (such as “things”-tumors, “states of affairs”-suffering, “concepts”-labels given to people) will each require a different style of attention in order to explore and clarify their “being.” Perhaps it would do well to explore being in dialogue with others who take a different approach. Your attention will notice things mine won’t.

And then, there is this “causality” thing. Perhaps one way of looking at the question of being is to ask the question “What causes this to appear the way it does?” And, as we have seen, the question of cause is complex.¹⁰ But it *must* be complex, for cause is not simply a matter of what forces this (thing, state of affairs . . .) into being. We must recognize the mutual interplay of

10. In fact we have not even introduced distinctions between necessary and sufficient causes (in the West) or the numbers of different types of causes in the East.

(1) states of affairs that provide environments conducive to a given state or thing forming or coming into being, (2) surrounding conditions or entities that further facilitate or block formation, (3) particular stimuli triggering “being” (4) the potency or tendencies of the being itself, bringing itself into new being, (5) random chance, facilitating being where none had been. In terms of our examples, what environment surrounds this suffering, that gives it room to be what it is? What conditions, events or other beings have contributed to the shape of this suffering? How did they contribute? What was the particular trigger that stimulated the presence of this suffering? What might have happened if this trigger were present in a different environment, under different conditions? What potency or trajectory does this suffering have itself inside of us? Where is it leading? Into what does it invite me? Where does chance play a part? What, of this suffering, is random, entirely new, creative?

And then we become present. We sit with our suffering, with our uncertainty, with our child. We wait and allow them to become present to us. We pay attention however we pay attention. And we notice what comes. Sometimes we make careful observations without. Sometimes we look deep within. Wisdom explores reality by paying careful attention to reality in the ways that we honestly (really) can pay attention.

Asking Questions about Experience

Let us now apply our skills of “asking questions” to the questions about being/reality. What might *wisdom* look like as we ask questions about reality: about our medical condition, our suffering, our children? Perhaps it might be helpful to begin by asking what *foolishness* might look like. Go back to the beginning of the chapter on asking questions and look again at the list of “foolish extremes.” What would “don’t ask” look like with regard to our medical situation? What would “demanding all or nothing” involve with regard to our assessment of our child? What would “throwing everything we believed out the window” look like with regard to suffering?

Asking questions begins with honestly acknowledging our doubts. Perhaps our doubt involves a slight sense of dissatisfaction with the school counselor's "label" of our child. We know there are problems, but Doubt is this combination of what we know and what we don't know. We identify the "living doubts," those nagging sensations that something is not resolved. Or perhaps we, like Descartes, are in need of starting over again. It is time to dismantle our entire belief-structures and re-discover a new starting place. As we review the character of our doubt, we become aware of *when* we ask questions: is this the time to ask about this? Am I asking this (trying to prove/disprove this label concerning my child, for example) just because others have brought up the issue, or is it a question I really have for myself (or is my question slightly different from theirs? - this itself is an important step of wisdom)?

Now there is the *who* question. Who am I questioning anyway? Is this about my child? Is it about the counselor? Is it about *me*? What questions belong pointed toward what people? What kind of "who" might I draw into my questions? We have learned, for example, that questions of reality and questions of Ultimate Reality are often intertwined. Are we asking questions of our health in the context of a community of healing, or in the context of an Ultimate Healer? What would it mean to inquire about our uncertainty in *these* contexts?

Then we ask ourselves *why* we ask these questions about reality. Do we really need certain answers about this suffering in order to live through it? Do we need certain answers about this suffering in order to continue our faith in God? Why are *we* asking about this question? Why are we asking *this* question? Remember, different cultures ask different questions about things. Different aspects of reality become available to different styles of awareness, different kinds of questions. Different dimensions of reality become open through different ways of knowing. Why are we asking this question *this way*? Perhaps To reflect on these questions about our asking questions leads us to see the reality of the reality we are questioning ever clearer.

Then we ask the "how deep" question. Is this uncertain medical condition a simple matter of a rash we had yesterday, or is this potentially a matter of life and death? How deep does this

dissatisfaction go? Does this matter with our child threaten our basic trust? How might it affect our relationship if I come to this (or that) conclusion about things?

Perhaps we revise our questions, perhaps we investigate details, perhaps we just sit and wait. And then, just maybe, we get an idea. We wonder if perhaps the ambiguity about the medical condition is evidence of a few different kinds of factors simultaneously affecting our bodies. We have a feeling that suffering will not go away, will not be “answered,” but that perhaps Life is bigger than suffering. We suspect that the school counselor is on to something, but does not see the whole picture. A hypothesis is born. And we play with it. We evaluate that hypothesis. Is this idea influenced by fallacies (“I knew a kid once and the counselor labeled him, but he turned out to be a great human being once he got out of school” - hasty generalization: What percent of the time in general are counselors wrong?). Perhaps we do the “Jain” thing and look at the issue from a number of points of view (From a certain point of view my child IS x, From a certain point of view my child is NOT x . . . ; we explore how my child’s friends view my child, how my child’s friend’s parents view my child . . .). At times we must realize that language (labels, for example) will always be inadequate to reality. But at the same time, reality is not just “points of view” and mysteries beyond language. We can run medical tests, to see what symptoms arise. We can acknowledge the real presence of elements in our lives that contribute to suffering. While inquiry about being must always deal with language and points of view, there is a danger in *reducing* reality to either.

Practicing Reality

And so we find ourselves exercising the skills of practicing reality. We decide our reality by practice. We decide to change our diet, to balance exercise and rest, and to take *some* (but not all) the medicine recommended. That decision is itself a perspective on our reality. We decide to live with suffering, rather than “answer” it or “fix” it. That decision itself is a statement about “being.” We fix our belief, and the fixation of our belief about the nature of what is is itself

“lived metaphysics.” While we still have loose ends to consider, for example, we decide that we have a “sufficient warrant to act as if . . .” Ultimate Reality is larger than the realities of our suffering. We don’t need to know exactly why this or that happens in order to live in a world that suffers. And so we decide reality.

We put reality into practice. Our medical reality as decided demands that we change our diet. But changing diet and exercise is not always easy, and it may not be best to change everything overnight. So we put reality into practice, one step at a time. Perhaps “putting reality into practice” with regards to our suffering means some investment in meditation, picturing, re-considering the character of our and that of others around us. Perhaps we see our own contribution to our child’s “problem” and we commit to changing our own ways of relating. Again, this takes practice to realize the reality.

Finally, we see reality through practice. As we change the diet, as we relate to our child, as we live into suffering, we (once again) pay attention, and we “see” what is in the very act of acting. We recognize the different kinds of reality involved (things, states of affairs, ideas . . .) and how they interrelate. Action-intuition. This is not just “feedback” about our hypothesis, although it includes this. Rather it is comprehending something of the nature of being itself right then and there at the moment.

Metaphysics addresses the issues of being and reality. Wisdom faces being and the questions of reality honestly and openly. Wisdom brings appropriate attention to what “is” in front of it. Wisdom asks question when and how they are needed. But it does not stop there. Wisdom also practices reality in the midst of life.

[For an exploration of your own being and reality, consider JA 12.1

My Reality]

Journal Assignment 12.1 My Reality

Part One - Discussion about Reality

The first part of this assignment is to help you clarify your own philosophical beliefs with regard to the topic of metaphysics. Of course, you have only begun to think about these issues. And furthermore, this chapter itself has only presented a sketchy survey of a few approaches to these issues, and has developed the debates between the different schools of thought even less. Nonetheless, one can take a brave step forward and “try on a few beliefs for size” just to see how it might feel. So, here are the questions that we introduced at the beginning of the chapter, the questions that characterize the discussion about being and reality. Try and answer each one for yourself. After thinking about the questions for a while, how would you answer if someone asked you *this* question?

- When we say that something *is* what do we mean?
- What things exist, really?
- Are there different *kinds* of being or reality?
- What is “being” or “reality” *like*?
- What *causes* things to appear as they are?
- What is the relationship between *permanence* and *change*?
- Is reality *one* or *many*?

Part Two - Practicing Reality

Now that you have an idea what you believe about things (or about nothing :), it is time to put those beliefs into practice. Take a sample situation in your own life, something you are working with (think of the examples we used at the discussion of **Practice** at the end of the chapter). Now, using the process of paying attention, asking questions, and practicing reality presented there, see if you can apply the love of wisdom to the complex realities of your life.