

Metaphysics
by
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"All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1:1). Thus Aristotle, ever the biologist, let the reader know right away that what we call *metaphysics* is something that cannot be understood apart from the senses. Seeing is believing, and that cannot be more true than in ghost hunting.

The word *metaphysics* is derived from an Ancient Greek phrase that means literally "after the physics." There is some dispute as to whether ancient historians or Aristotle himself applied this term to the book he wrote after he wrote *Physics* (from the Greek word for nature), but either way it was intended to mean something sequential, not something spiritual.

In modern times, the term *metaphysics* is commonly used to indicate something about reality beyond the senses--that is, literally after or beyond nature, also an implication of sequence. In order to understand what might be beyond the senses, we have to understand what is in the senses. Philosophers have, for millennia, argued over whether knowledge must come through the senses first (before it becomes knowledge), or knowledge can come from sources other than the senses (like contemplation, revelation, or moral insight). There is no clear consensus on either side of this disagreement.

In philosophy, *metaphysics* is concerned with two questions: 1. What is there, or what is reality? (ontology) 2. What is true and valid knowledge, and how is it discovered? (epistemology). Both questions are important. Are phenomena like ghosts and EVP real? And, how do we obtain valid knowledge about these phenomena?

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle was seeking to examine the causes of things. He called knowledge of the causes of things *episteme*, from which we get the modern philosophical study of epistemology and the predominate goal of science--to discover and to understand the causes of things. That is what those who study paranormal phenomena care about first--what causes paranormal phenomena? Unfortunately, Aristotle is of little help in answering this question, but we can follow the advice of David Hume and take the attitude that knowledge of cause is more common sense than abstract thought.

Hume believed that there is no rational basis for understanding causation. When we see one billiard ball strike another, we attribute the movement of the second to the impact of the first not because we have deduced causation, but because it is consistent with our experience. Hume thought that we are outfitted by nature to assess causation so that we may live in the world, and that experience is key to understanding causation. For the modern investigator, if causes can be understood, then we can move on to the question what does the existence of paranormal phenomena mean?

The method one uses to study a phenomenon can make all the difference in understanding it. To grasp the importance of method, we can begin with our first story--the story of science.

Before the Classic Age of Ancient Greece, the most important question one could ask was "what is the best sort of life to live?" This is the question of ethics. The word *ethic* comes from the Greek word *ethos* which is usually translated as *character*. An ethic is the essence of one's character insofar as it is the foundation of choices about what form of life to live and how to live that life in relation to other people.

Ancient Greek philosophers, beginning with Pythagoras (6th Century BCE), changed the question to "what is the nature of the world?" This question is better suited to the ambition to control things, like environment, food sources, health, politics, etc., and assumes that the good life is brought about by increased power and control. Pythagoras gave us the idea that the nature of world can be understood through the use of numbers and mathematics. Plato, who thought that the "real" world was accessible only through enlightened contemplation of the Forms, and Aristotle, who thought that the "real" world was knowable through observation that is guided by rational thought, were so influential that their ideas are incorporated into virtually everything studied today. The studies of physics, biology, political science, psychology, ethics, botany, and many more originated primarily with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Many modern Christian theological principles, such as the notion of eternal, unchangeable truth, the idea that the soul is separate from the body, and the concept of transmigration of souls—virtually all of those ideas that constitute theories about the nature and origin of ghosts as departed souls—originated with Plato, and came to the Church through the neo-Platonist, Plotinus. Other influences on Christian thought include Stoicism, developed by Zeno in the 3rd Century, BCE, who proposed the idea of a rational force that governs the universe, and the idea that people are different from animals. If you do not find these ideas shocking, it is only because you are an intellectual child of these Ancient Greek thinkers. If you think all magic spells are uttered in Latin, then you are a child of Hollywood.

Philosophy and natural science were the same thing up until the 16th Century. Francis Bacon was so disgusted with the dogmatic devotion to Aristotle by the Church Doctors (Professors) and theologians, that he proposed a *Novum Organum* (New Method). He said if we are to progress beyond the point Aristotle reached nearly 2000 years before, we need to do things differently. For that, he proposed an experimental method, and developed the foundation for the split between science and philosophy.

The 18th Century Age of Enlightenment would draw heavily upon the philosophy of Rene Descartes and the science of Isaac Newton, both of whom insisted that experimental method is the only reliable path to knowledge—more accurately, to the new religion. Newton, in particular, did not see science as something opposed to Christianity. In fact, he strongly maintained that his mechanical and gravitational laws actually proved the existence of God. How else can the universe be so orderly and precise if it was not created by an all-seeing, all-knowing God? For that, Newton is known as "the Saint of Science." Descartes also offered philosophical proof of God's existence, though his argument is less convincing to those who do not begin with the assumption that God exists.

The Royal Society in England, which is a society of scientists, was founded in the year 1660. Within a few years of its founding, the Royal Court received news that a woman in Scotland had given birth to a lamb. The Court asked the Society to send someone up to investigate the report. Now, no one actually believed that a woman gave birth to a lamb, but the important issue is this: Thirty years previous they would have sent a contingent of churchmen to investigate. The Royal Society, with its repository of the world's most systematic thinkers, was the new authority for answering mysterious questions, and became the institution for promotion and celebration of the achievements of science.

The split between science and philosophy came gradually over the 18th and 19th Centuries, beginning, more or less, with John Locke. Locke rejected the idea that we can know anything about the true nature of reality—all we can know is what we can experience. He insisted that if we know anything, it is because we *perceived* it. He also supported Descartes' reductionism. That is, the way to study something is to break it down into smaller pieces, study each piece by observing it, and put the conclusions together into a theory. Of course, there is much more to it than that, but you get the idea.

By the mid 19th Century, many science-oriented philosophers were fed up with the incessant arguments over metaphysical issues such as the mind/body problem, realism versus nominalism, and idealism versus materialism. Those who desired to know something positively could see that advances in science and technology would not be gained through the sort of speculation found in the intellectual debates ringing the walls of salons and coffeehouses. Something had to be done!

Ernst Mach and others proposed that we ignore everything that cannot be observed, and assume that the only knowable world is material in nature, and knowable through the senses. It is a metaphysical position now used to deny the existence of metaphysics. Knowledge obtained through revelation, from any nonexperimental method, or from any form of pure thought is rejected in favor of knowledge derived by experimental methods. Logical positivism was a boon for physical science and technology, but it represented a great loss for the social and other phenomenological sciences.

Logical positivism begins with Descartes' system of critical doubt, and then proceeds directly to reductionism. It makes sense to break down a block of granite into molecules and atoms to study it, and arrive at some meaningful conclusions about the nature of granite. It does not make sense to use the same method to study music or poetry. Breaking down a musical composition into notes and measures to derive a theory about music is going to miss the most important and meaningful elements of the phenomenon of music. Similarly, the reduction of a technological device such as a television will not yield its most important elements. The most thorough study of the components of a television set will tell you nothing about the programming or the social purposes of such a "thing". As Goethe emphasized in his treatise on color, the physics of light and study of the visible spectrum tells us everything about light **except what we see**.

In studying paranormal phenomena, some positivistic methods make sense. For one thing, logical positivism is so pervasive that many people will not consider any proposition for which there is no empirical (observed and measured) evidence—they want data. Positivism emphasizes reduction and measurement, and it makes sense to isolate and to distinguish the paranormal from other phenomena and to measure it with recording devices, photography, meters, and other methods. Using positivistic methods, we can conclude what is probably not paranormal, but we cannot say with any certainty what paranormal phenomena are or what they mean.

By the way, nothing can be proven by science. Without boring you with complicated philosophical explanations, it must be said that science, any science, can do only two things--(1) it can **disprove** something, and (2) it can support a hypothesis with some degree of confidence. Anyone who tells you that something has been proven by science is either lying or profoundly ignorant.

Ghost sightings tend to be cultural phenomena. It is not uncommon for people in Ireland, for example, to see ghosts. At the other end of the spectrum, many people do not believe in ghosts. When American anthropologist Laura Bohannan was studying the people of Tiv in West Africa in the 1970s, she tried an experiment (something anthropologists are wont to do). Under the conviction that there are some universal human values, she told the story of Hamlet to the council of elders one rainy afternoon. She did not get beyond the part where Hamlet sees his father's ghost before her hypothesis was shattered. She had to use the English word *ghost* because these people had no word for ghost.

The elders explained to her that she got the story wrong. There are no such things as ghosts, so what Hamlet saw was an omen. When she began to tell of the conversation Hamlet had with his father, they informed her that omens can't talk. Because these people believed that there is no life after death, Hamlet was either a zombie animated by a witch, or he was driven mad by witchcraft. All of her attempts to explain our idea of ghosts, and most of the details of the rest of

the story, were "corrected" by the elders with the admonition that she must have misunderstood, and that she should discuss this with her elders where she returned to her country.

We are what we believe—we believe what we “know”. We never conclude a study of something until all of our cherished prejudices are sufficiently recovered in the course of the study. That is metaphysics.