frequently shied away from? Is there a valid use of art as protest and criticism within Christianity? Do we miss important dimensions of faith, and of God's nature, if we don't think carefully about beauty in all its forms?

As we have seen in this chapter, aesthetics often takes us into complex discussions that deal with difficult and extreme cases, and one can quickly get the impression that these are debates best left to the experts. I think those are important discussions to be aware of, and it is disappointing to me that Christians haven't been more engaged in them. But behind these more rarified deliberations about art are the sorts of questions that came up in our class discussion of Plotinus, truth, and beauty. Art is everywhere, and it is a powerful force in the world. If for no other reasons than these, art ought to be one of the "big questions" Christians think about carefully.

9
What Is Real?

Have you ever been in a serious conversation with a friend when someone blurts out, "Get real"? Getting real means something like this: stop fooling around, this is serious, this is *real*. But is there such a thing as "real"? What is reality, really? Maybe there is no reality in itself, only the way things seem to us: your reality and mine, your world and my world. Asking about what is real is another one of those big, old questions that philosophers love. The philosophical study of reality—of what has being, of what *is*—is called **metaphysics**. The word **ontology** is also used for the study of being as such, but for our chapter we will use the word "metaphysics." Both of these words can sound a bit intimidating, yet like many things in philosophy, it all starts pretty simply, with the basic ordinary things of life. These are things like dogs, cars, trees, streams, cows, and even milk. Yes, I said milk.

Do you have a friend who is interested in the same things as you but who doesn't always agree with you for some weird reason? They just can't seem to see things the right way—*your* way. Good times happen hanging out and discussing things with them, even to the point of what might look like a pitched argument, but it is just the two of you enjoying yourselves. The odd part is that you and your friend may know a lot about the subject, but you still don't agree. And it doesn't matter much what the topic is, the fun is pretty much the same.

My wife and I are like that when we are in the right mood. We had quite a discussion one day after going to the store about—wait for it—milk. To be precise, it was half-and-half. I was amazed that they could make a fat-free half-and-half and bought some to try it. My beloved Sally was less impressed. "That's not real half-and-half," she said. "Sure it is," I insisted, "it says so right on the label!" There are laws against lying on product labels, after all. "It's half-and-half, just nonfat. Isn't that great?" She was not impressed. We ended up looking up the ingredients online, getting into what truly constituted half-and-half, the whole burrito. She insisted that real half-and-half has cream in it (that's why it's so yummy), and the essence of cream has to do with milk fat. Therefore half-and-half without fat is also without cream. And if there's no cream, there's no half-and-half—it's all just milk. Darn, that was a good argument. The logic was tight, so what was I going to do? Well, I replied with the famous line, "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it's a duck. The bottle says 'half-and-half,' and it sure tastes like it to me in my coffee, so who cares about the so-called essence of cream?" Still, I have to admit she won that one. Don't tell her I said so.

Believe it or not, we were already getting into metaphysics. We said metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that studies what is real, what has being. It seeks through **reason** and logical analysis to classify reality and clarify the ideas we use to name our everyday experience so we can better understand our everyday world. So metaphysics is philosophy that sets out to improve our understanding of reality in general, especially regarding our conceptual knowledge of everyday things. In our age of technology, students often have trouble understanding the significant differences between natural sciences on the one hand and metaphysics on the other. Both seek to understand reality, right? So how are they different? Let's see if we can clarify things.

The goal of a natural science like botany is a better understanding of one dimension of our world, plant life, while physics, for example, focuses on matter and energy. Metaphysics, on the other hand, is a branch of philosophy that, instead of test tubes and particle colliders, uses the tools of experience, logic, and reason to critically analyze and improve the way we think and talk about things. Its data is the

experiences of everyday life instead of lab results or field reports. Its goal is truth: not to change the world but to develop the best philosophical description of the world. To do that we have to criticize the way we name and explain our own experiences: our intuitive understanding of what is real and how things work. This task can be troubling to some folks.

Many people in our culture feel that we own our stories. Our experience is ours and cannot be subject to criticism. My story is mine to tell, not yours. There is some truth to these claims, of course. The actual history of each person is so complex that it is bound to be unique, and that history enters into our personality and character in deep ways. Our history shapes who we are. But when we name that experience and turn it into words, when we tell our story, then we interpret our history. And interpretation is always open to analysis and critique. No memory is wholly accurate; no interpretation is perfect. Of course some are better than others, but any memory or interpretation can be questioned by external evidence. If I see something in the water and say, "That's a snake," but you say, "No, that's a soggy stick," one of us has a better interpretation of our experience—and it could matter to our health! After all, some snakes are poisonous.

The concepts, terms, narratives and systems of thought we use to name and explain the world are indeed open to analysis and can be improved upon. Metaphysics seeks to improve the logic, clarity, and truth of our understanding of reality in general: "being as such," Aristotle said.

Now back to milk as an example of how metaphysics works. In the debate my wife and I had, we distinguished between what half-and-half has to be to count as such and what it tastes like. What things taste, look, and feel like, among other things, we can now call their properties or qualities. A **property** is an attribute of a thing that helps us describe and pick it out among other objects. The taste of cream or the feathers on a duck are examples of properties, and so is being four legged for a horse or an elephant. My debate with Sally turned on the difference between experience and the thing itself, between how an object seems to the observer and how it is in itself. To start with, let's call things like one specific elephant, or horse, or tree, or

stone, or container of half-and-half, particular objects or particular things. Think about the random list of things I just named. Do they have anything in common? Sure, and one of them is that they are all real, concrete, specific things. They exist at a specific place and time. They all have a history, for they endure over time. They are all particular things rather than something general, like the number three. Three apples are particular things; the number three is not. In older language we would call a particular thing a particular **substance**. Such a thing is both real and specific, particular rather than general. It is that specific thing and not something else. Particular substances have properties of various types: being four legged, having a trunk and branches, being hairy, and so forth. But properties are different. Properties may be real, like my mass or height, but mass and height are not particular things. Other things can have my same weight or my height, too. But that does not make them the same object I am. So already we have made one metaphysical discovery. A particular thing is not a property and a property is not a particular thing. And some properties, at the very least, can be shared by other things.

Now back to the milk. Sally was arguing that half-and-half just means half milk and half cream. I agree so far. Now half milk and half cream has certain properties of color and taste that the fat-free version also has. I could not tell the difference in my coffee, for example. The taste and color seem to be the same in that context. However, if half-and-half can only be the real thing if it is half milk and half cream, then I have to admit that's not what the fat-free version really is. It's a very good substitute in coffee for those seeking to avoid fat, but it's not authentic. It's not the real thing.

Notice that we are not arguing here about just any old properties, like being in a pink quart container. In this case we are arguing about special properties—**essential properties**. The point is basically that milk fat is essential to real half-and-half. Coming in a quart-sized container (or a pink one, for that matter) is nonessential. The half-and-half would stay the same if you poured it into two pints instead. Yet half-and-half without the yummy cream is just not the real thing! There are lots of examples of essential properties for everyday things: being round is essential to something being a circle, for example, and being a mammal is essential to being a member of our species (we assume, dear reader, that you are Homo sapiens).

This kind of metaphysical analysis goes way back in our culture, all the way to the ancient Greeks. *Socrates* and *Plato* got things going, to be sure, but it is *Aristotle* who is best remembered as both the father of Western logic and what we now call "scientific methods." His was the major voice in ancient Greek metaphysics, and he wrote the first book with that name.

Aristotle's school was called the Lyceum. He had the habit of walking around during discussions with his students, so his followers are called Peripatetics ("walkabouts" in Greek). Aristotle contributed not only to logic and metaphysics, but also to ethics, biology, political theory, and literary analysis, among others areas. The reason that Aristotle started so many things was not that he was good at starting stuff but that he was good at organizing and analyzing things. He had a lifelong interest in classifying things and organizing knowledge. His was a towering intellect. Maybe we should call him Aristotle the Great—but his most famous pupil has the handle Alexander the Great, so maybe not.

Aristotle wrote the first great work of metaphysics by seeking to understand the most basic principles of real things. Examples of these kinds of conceptual categories would be causation; freedom and **determinism**; identity and difference; time and change; possibility and impossibility; as well as our old friends substance and property. All of these are conceptual categories that apply to everything that is, all that has being. It sounds pretty dry, but the arguments can be fascinating. Let's take as an example the problem of change and identity.

What makes something the same thing over time? After all, things are changing all the time. Does anything really remain the same? And what would that look like, anyway? We look at what it means for a person to be the same in chapter 11; here we are looking at any particular thing at all, from trees to stars and everything in between. Let's take up an old problem normally called *the ship of Theseus*. We will update this old problem with a new ship, the *USS Enterprise* from *Star Trek*. In *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), we learn that the spaceship has been completely refitted from the old one.

Let's imagine something similar. After three years of hard fighting, with lots of exciting explosions on board, the spaceship has slowly had every part replaced. Is it the same ship? Let's call them ship A (before all the fighting) and ship B. Ship A is clearly the good old *Enterprise*. Yet all the parts have been replaced, so is ship B also the identical *Enterprise*? When Captain Kirk finally gets aboard ship B after the three-year period, is he on the same famous spaceship as ship A? Getting at the answer will require that we explore some of the ways we talk about identity in metaphysics.

We could say no, of course it is not the same ship. It may have the same name and the same crew, but every part is different! How could it be the same? When this is our answer, we are working out of a theory of **material identity**. Something is the same if it is made up of just the same parts, the same "stuff." Yet this concept might be too strict. Can it help us to make sense of things with a new part that we normally think of as being the same? For example, let's say you replace the battery in your old phone. It would be very odd if you claimed this was a new phone. Would it not be normal to claim that you had the same phone but with a new battery? If so, then you do have the same phone after all. But if identity is material, how can it be the same when it has a vital new part? So there seems to be a problem with a strict material identity: a new part may not always make it all new.

There are other problems with using material identity to help us with the case of the two spaceships. We have seen that two things share material identity if they are made up of the same stuff. Two cars might look, drive, and run exactly alike, but because they are made up of different stuff, they do not share material identity. On the other hand, imagine a pile of old parts from ship A. This pile does share material identity with the old *Enterprise* even though the pile is not a working starship. This seems like an odd result, but it follows logically from the notion of material identity. This kind of identity does not appear to be helpful for our case.

So just because they replace a part or two of the *Enterprise*, it's not really a new ship. Material identity does not seem to help us with our basic intuitions about the identity of the spaceship. But what if you

replaced every part of your phone or the *Enterprise*? It might make sense to claim, then, that you had a new one, right? If I replace every part on my car over time, don't I have a new car that just looks like the old one? If this is true, then the new *Enterprise* (ship B) really is a different ship than ship A, despite having the same name. Yet they are still the same in some ways, right? How can we explain this same-and-different conflict?

Back to metaphysics! Maybe another notion of sameness will help. This one has to do with truths about an object's properties. A property is something like the color, shape, or temperature of an object, say, the color of a banana or maybe its taste. Monkeys and planets are things but not properties. Particular things have properties like "being hairy" or "being a celestial body." Properties can be shared with other things. A banana and a ball can be the same color, for example. There is a strict or absolute sense of identity used in metaphysics when things have all the same properties. Take any two things; let's call them E and G. If they share all the same properties, then anything said truly of E will also be true of G and vice versa.

To be sure, a particular thing like a phone or a spaceship has many, many properties that name every truth about it. Your phone has a huge number of such properties. For example, it works as a telephone, runs on batteries, has a specific size, weight, color, and so forth. One of its properties is the fact that you own it. Notice that this definition, called **strict** or **numerical identity**, is very exacting. It would not apply to any cases where there is even a minor difference, something we might completely overlook. Not only would your phone be a different phone if you changed the battery, your house would be a different house if you painted it. It is easy to see that, unfortunately, if we follow this theory of strict identity, once again the refurbished *Enterprise* (ship B) would be a different spaceship than the original ship A. Not only that, but perhaps the only thing that is truly identical is the thing itself at that specific time and place. In this case, there is no continuing identity over change or maybe not even over time. Getting old is a change after all!

Numerical identity might be helpful in pure logic or mathematics, but in our case it seems too narrow. We get this persistent thought

that there is some sense in which the old *Enterprise* (A) is the same as the new one (B). So is there any type or theory of identity that might help us see the *Enterprise* as the same ship? Sure there is; philosophers can be very creative! With each type of identity we discuss, notice that each uses different categories, different ways of thinking about things being "the same." If numerical identity is not always helpful for everyday sameness, there are less stringent theories of identity that might work.

So far we have looked at material identity and numerical (strict) identity. Two other types are property identity and **kind identity**. Let's go back to properties first. If my car and my shoes are the same color of black, they are then identical or the same in that they share a property (i.e., both being black). Likewise, you and your friend might weigh exactly the same. You then share the identical weight, along with some other properties like being human. Still, things can be a lot different and share just one property. If we insist on all the properties being the same, we are back to strict identity; but what if we are looking for a new understanding of sameness? What about all the properties shared by the original *Enterprise* and the new one? A and B share a large number of properties that are the same, like, being captained by Kirk, using dilithium crystals for power, having photon torpedoes and faster-than-light speed, and so on. If they share a lot of the same, relevant properties, they are similar.

Kind identity is a similar idea but a bit more specialized. Two things are kind identical if they are the same kind of thing ("sortal" is the technical word). A kind of thing is not the same as the property of a thing. Kinds of things are types of objects, like cars, trees, planets, or iron. The kind "dog" has properties (like having hair). Fido and Rex are both dogs, so they are identical relative to being dogs (they can be different in other ways, of course). My old cell phone and my new cell phone are identical relative to being cell phones.

Now kind or sortal identity can be helpful in some cases when we are trying to sort things out. How are two monarch butterflies of the same species alike and how are they different? Well, they are identical relative to being the same kind of butterfly, but they are not exactly the same in every respect. "Monarch butterfly" here is a kind of thing (a **natural kind**, in fact). "Flying with wings" is a property, but hummingbirds share that same property with Monarch butterflies without both animals being the same natural kind.

Using all these types of identity, all four meanings of "the same" we have developed, what about the old and the new *Enterprise*? Are ship A and B the same ship? Well, with respect to material identity we could simply say no. Ship B, the new *Enterprise*, has all new parts. We might, however, notice that there is at least some continuity between the original one and the new one. As each part is changed, it becomes part of the *Enterprise* and this means the new *Enterprise* has material continuity with the old one. What is more, they share several properties in common. Yet in the end they are not strictly the same ship, not numerically identical. Is that not the point? It is supposed to be new, improved, and much cooler, after all. How could it be exactly the same? Now we can answer our question. It is not the same ship, strictly speaking. It is the same ship in other ways, such as having material continuity, sharing many properties (being similar in our special sense), and being of the same kind (Constitution-class starship). So we have seen that answering our *Star Trek* puzzle has taken us into a more sophisticated understanding of sameness. It has taken us into metaphysics.

We are ready now to take on some broad questions from life, culture, nature, and human experience that metaphysics can help us answer more carefully. In other chapters of this book we look at questions of what it means to be human, various options in the mind-body problem, what is means to have free will, and whether there is life after death. In each one of these chapters we use metaphysical thinking to study the philosophical terrain. So these chapters provide excellent examples of how metaphysics works and why it's important in philosophy. We should look at just one more question here, to fill out this chapter's exploration of metaphysics. Let's go back to the question we started with. Let's get real.

REALISM AND NONREALISM

What is real? Like most of the big questions, there are a lot of philosophical debates and positions with respect to what is—what has

being or what is real. Are the colors we see in the world real or not, and in what sense of the term? In very broad terms there is a long debate between those who accept **realism** in its various forms and those who reject realism. The basic sense of "realism" is the idea that real things and properties exist independent of human perspectives and experiences. Then the easiest thing to start with is to lump all the different kinds of thinkers who reject realism into one category, called **nonrealism**, or sometimes **antirealism**. So here we will look at different types of realism but only one type of nonrealism. This will be **idealism**. To be sure, the full debate is more complex and detailed. In fact this debate about ultimate reality also occurs in various ways in the philosophy of other cultures—Indian and Chinese cultures, for example. But as with the rest of this chapter, we will focus here on Western thought.

Now that we've learned a little metaphysics, we can give a first approximate understanding of what a realist thinks. First of all, "realism" means different things in different areas of study. Realism is a term used in the study of art, literature, and film, for example. So we must emphasize that here we are speaking of realism in metaphysics. This means talking about real being—what really exists.

The debate between realism and idealism is about the world and the degree to which human experience shapes reality itself. The realist is committed to the idea that reality creates us; we don't create reality. The realist will argue that our experience, knowledge, and language about the world can always be wrong. This is because these things exist independent of human minds and experience. So the first thing the realist holds is that particulars exist. Take, for example, the long white clothesline in my backyard. This rope is a particular, specific thing that exists whether we experience it or not. The second thing that a realist believes is that the properties of a thing exist independent of both our experience of them and of our naming of them. I believe the clothesline at my backyard exists when no one is seeing it, and it has the property of being made of rope whether I experience it that way or not, and whether I name it as such or not. That makes me a realist about clotheslines.

Very few philosophers are realists about absolutely everything. Instead, thinkers tend to be realistic about some things and not others. In fact most people are realist about some things and not others. I believe there really is a president of the United States, and I don't believe unicorns really exist. You probably have other things you believe are real and some things you know are unreal. Philosophers debate about the reality of moral principles, numbers, temporal processes, and possibilities. It's easy to see what it means to be a realist with respect to particular things, but the reality of properties is a little more complicated and abstract.

One good example is colors. Imagine a bright red ball. The ball is both round and colored red. The fact that the ball is round seems like a pretty objective property, right? The realist will hold that the ball is round whether we experience it that way or not, and whether we name it that way or not. The ball is objectively round. Yet the color red is different. We know scientifically that we should be nonrealists about colors. The photons and wavelengths of light that cause our eyes to see colors are real enough, but they don't have a color apart from our eyes seeing it. Colors as we see them only exist because our eyes have certain abilities to decipher the photons and turn them into colors. We also know that different people see colors different ways. One of the authors of this book is very colorblind, for example. We also have experiments to show that different animals see colors in different ways since they have different kinds of eyes. So there are properties for which a nonrealist view is sensible. I believe that we normally share a common experience of colors as humans, based on the typical human eye and the wavelengths in the color spectrum. But without the experience of human beings, the colors we experience would not exist. They would not be real in a metaphysical sense, even though they appear real to us.

The idealist has a very different viewpoint on these matters. For idealism the ultimate reality is ideas, not matter. What we think of as "matter" or "energy" is, at bottom, sets of possible experiences of the mind, a set of ideas, if you will, arranged in a particular way for everyone. Minds encounter these objective ideas so as to have the experiences that we call "the external world." After all, no one has

been able to explain in a satisfactory way (the idealist will argue) how something physical, whether in the external world or in the chemicals of the brain, can give rise to the thoughts, ideas, and conscious experiences in the mind. The ideas we encounter as we experience the world—sensations—are very different from the kinds of physical interactions that matter and energy bring about. Sensations are, after all, mental events. Since all of our experiences are sets of ideas in our mind, and since our knowledge of the world comes to us through experience, why believe in a world that exists apart from our experience and other mental events? Maybe the world is fundamentally nothing other than minds and ideas, existing independent of me alone (not just an illusion, for example) yet still not independent of all ideas. The idealist thus questions the assumption that external objects are nonmental just because they are not my own inner thoughts alone.

To be clear: the idealist does not necessarily think the world around us is an illusion. The things we encounter in the world are there, true enough. The world is not made up by me, nor is it just my dream. The world of things we all experience does not depend on me and my mind any more than it does on yours. It's just that these things, too, are ideas rather than nonmental "matter." Let's take a duck for example. Imagine you are with some friends and you all see a duck walking by. What you experience is the sensations in your conscious minds caused by the duck: sounds (quack, quack!), colors, shapes, movements (waddle, waddle) and the like. The idealist does not question that the duck is made up of parts, but does question whether what we call "matter and energy" is at bottom nonmental. We know about the duck parts, however small, because they, too, are observed. They are also sensations, mental things. The idea that matter and energy are nonmental is a philosophical assumption. It's based on a questionable abstraction, the idealist will argue, moving us beyond our observations and evidence.

The position we have been describing, very briefly, gives you some idea of what idealism is all about. It denies that there is any particular thing, or any world at all, other than mental realities of various kinds. The root of all this kind of thinking in the Western world is undoubtedly Plato, with his theory of forms or ideas. For Plato the

eternal and unchanging forms (*eidos*, in Greek) are the ultimate reality. They exist eternally and perfectly, independent of the world of change we live in every day. These forms are the perfect reality and include morality and beauty as well as physical truths. What all cats have in common is the perfect cat in the realm of forms. Likewise, the virtue of telling the truth has a perfect form of honesty. The form of honesty is that common and ultimate standard by which we can know the honesty or dishonesty in ourselves and everyone else can be known. Forms provide us with a universal standard for all truth, beauty, and goodness independent of human cultures, perspectives, and histories. What we experience in the world of time and change is a series of shadows or imperfect copies of these forms or ideas.

Plato was not an idealist as we are describing it here in this chapter, but this ancient Greek philosophy is the taproot of later idealism. For our modern idealism, to summarize things, what is real is ideas. What we know about the world depends upon the experience of our minds, and there is no reason to hold that what we experience is anything more than mental properties arranged in stable, recurring patterns. Our experience provides us with all the proof we need that the world is not mere illusion. Things are real. Most modern idealists have believed in God or something like God, and argued that the ideas we experience as the created world are all in the mind of God. God eternally and reliably thinks the world into being at all times. This creative activity is what makes the world exist, and these divine ideas cause our experience of the world beyond us. Despite what critics sometimes claim, for idealism, the world we all hold in common is not a mere illusion or subjective dream.

On the other hand, the typical human developing child is not an idealist. We grow up with what cognitive scientists call a "folk ontology." Folk ontology is realist in its assumptions about things in the world. What walks, quacks, and looks like a duck is a duck; what you see is what you get! The way we see and experience the world *just* is the way the world is apart from us. We might call this naïve realism or, in a kinder mood, **direct realism**. Most people on earth seem to be direct realists, but this popularity does not mean idealism is wrong and realism is right. It only means that the arguments of

idealism are hard and complex—but so are the arguments of quantum theory! Just because a theory is not typical, popular, or easy to grasp for human beings does not mean the theory is wrong. Philosophers are especially willing to entertain these difficult and untypical notions since they are seeking truth, not popularity or ease of understanding.

As we move on to other views, notice that in discussing idealism we have talked about two things. On the one hand, the reality of things and their nature is under discussion. The duck may or may not exist independent of our minds. On the other hand, there are questions about how we know about the external world. If we focus on things, we have a view called **metaphysical idealism**. And this is the way the term "idealism" is almost always used in philosophy. If we question how we know about the things we experience, then we turn to **epistemology**, the theory of knowledge. If we focus on the mind's role in how we know about the external world, then we have **epistemological idealism**. We have followed this epistemological discussion already. We have talked about our experience and knowledge of the world and whether a mind is necessary to such knowledge—whether our knowledge of so-called objective reality is always, in fact, subjective (i.e., shaped by our minds). Colors were one example of something where epistemological idealism makes sense. Some philosophers, most famously *Immanuel Kant*, are epistemological idealists about all human knowledge of the world. We will use Kant as an example of this more universal approach a little later in this chapter. For now let's introduce the general position.

Epistemological idealism holds that while reality does provide the ground and basis (metaphysically) for knowledge and experience, we can in fact know nothing about reality in itself. Our minds are so active in knowing the world that we can only really know about reality as it appears to us. This is because our knowledge of the external world outside of our consciousness is always already shaped and made possible by our conscious, mental experiences. The human mind is active in all human knowledge; this is the founding principle of epistemological idealism. You might say that this viewpoint is barely realist—and that's fair. Kant accepted the bare existence of the objects of our knowledge but held an idealist view of knowledge. In

Kant's view, thought and experience is always and only made possible by the structures and powers of the knower's mind. So the duck is assumed directly and certainly as a real thing outside of sensations by our experience of the duck itself. Yet as we know, see, hear, and feel the duck—the duck as we know it, so to say—it is a part of our subjective sensations. So the fact that we call this a "duck"—that it quacks, has specific colors, waddles, flies, and exhibits other properties we experience—all these things depend upon human consciousness. What the duck is in and to itself is beyond our understanding. Since human knowledge comes though experience, we can have no knowledge of what grounds that experience but is beyond it. We cannot know the world as it is.

Understanding these kinds of arguments can take some time. Maybe we could help things along by seeing that epistemological idealism lies on the spectrum between direct realism and idealism. For epistemological idealism there is a world outside of my mind, and I know that's true just by my sensations themselves. I can tell the difference between experiences of the world around me and things like dreams, afterimages, and other illusions. We humans, at least, can know nothing more about them except that they exist. We know they exist because they provide the ground of our experience. But knowing anything more about the object always involves the human, subjective, and active mind.

We will return to Kant shortly, but for completion of our spectrum of views, we should now consider one more philosophical perspective that stands between direct realism and idealism. This school calls itself **critical realism**. While borrowing some ideas from earlier thinkers like *John Locke*, critical realism developed as an early twentieth-century school of thought in opposition to the then-dominant philosophy of idealism. Critical realists agree with epistemological idealism, and differ from direct realism, in holding that the human mind is active and necessary in knowing about the external world (including ducks). They also agree that these things exist and are not illusions. Some real things are extramental; not everything is an idea of some kind. The crucial difference from epistemological idealism comes from the implications the critical realist draws for how much we can know

about these external, real things. Critical realists don't accept the "what you see is what you get" attitude of direct realism. Sometimes our experiences do not apply to the objects we see apart from our mental, subjective experience—independent of the knower's mind. Color was our best example, but there are other examples as well. Put a straight stick into a clear, flowing stream, hold it still, and you will see it bend and break—a trick of light and water. The stick only appears to break and ripple, of course, and we usually ignore this effect. Yet are all experiences like this? Do they all apply only to the way we experience things rather than the things in themselves?

The critical realist is more optimistic than idealists. Critical realists argue against idealism that some of our experiences, some of the properties we observe regarding external objects, are there whether any person experiences them or not. Maybe the colors I see on the duck require eyes in order to be manifested. But the photons themselves actually exist and have specific wavelengths. And sure, maybe the quality of sound I hear as a quack requires ears in order to be manifested. Still, the sound waves are there anyway, right? As for motion, the critical realist will insist that the way the duck waddles is true for that animal whether any human sees it or not: it's an objectively real thing independent of any observer. John Locke called these "primary qualities."

The idealist will respond quickly: How do we know the difference? If some are mental and some are not, how can we tell them apart? This is the "critical" part of critical realism: we have to subject our perceptions to analytic, personal, public, and rational evaluation. The sciences provide us with some of this critical distance from our own perceptions and perspectives. So does investigating the same supposed objective fact in different ways, and bringing other people into the critical process. The point here is that, contrary to idealism, the fact that the mind is always and everywhere active in human knowing does not always lead to the conclusions the idealist holds. Their argument moves too quickly over an important point. The mind of the knower might be active, but some of what we know about the thing could still be objectively real. The duck waddles whether we see it or not.

We can clarify what critical realism is all about by looking at an old chestnut of a problem. If a tree falls in a forest, and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? The critical realist will be analytical and reflective about what the word "sound" means in this question. Do we mean vibrations through the air, what we call sound waves? Or do we mean the quality of the sounds of the tree falling, sounds the human body detects and the human mind experiences? Let's call those "sound qualities." The critical realist will say that if no one hears the tree fall, then it does not create sound qualities in a hearer since there is no hearer. To be sure, crashing trees still generate sound waves in the environment, even when nothing hears them. So some things about what we call sound are objective and some are subjective. Critical reflection and investigation can tell us the difference.

TURN TO THE KNOWING SUBJECT: KANT AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Having surveyed the terrain of the metaphysical debate between idealism and realism, we will now explore more closely the view of Kant on this topic. One of the greatest of Western philosophers, Kant contributed profoundly to the study of metaphysics as he did so many other topics. He could appear in almost any chapter of this book since his work touches upon so many of the big questions in philosophy. His complex response to the arguments of idealists and realists is called **transcendental idealism**. Kant used this word "transcendental" to speak of what made something possible in the first place. For example, taking up space is transcendental to being colored: it is only possible to have a color if a thing takes up space. For Kant, as we will see, the human mind is active in making any and all experiences possible in the first place. So Kant held to a special version of what we call epistemological idealism. How did he get there?

Like many of the philosophers of the Enlightenment, Kant believed that the growth of sciences in his age provided intellectuals with the best model for how to do philosophy. And Kant was concerned about the arguments of skeptics like David Hume that undermined the reliability of universal scientific knowledge. So in his most famous book, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant set for himself the

task of answering the critics and providing scientific knowledge with a sure and searching foundation. After all, he taught in a university (Königsburg) that was famous for its faculty of mathematics and astronomy. So maybe Kant was being true to his school.

The problem for philosophers was how natural sciences can discover true theories. A theory in natural science makes generalizations based upon a limited number of experiments or a limited range of data. These can include universal laws of nature. The physics of Newton, for example, which dominated the Enlightenment age, gave mathematical laws that were universal in their scope. Yet they were based on a few local experimental results and observations. So how can we know that the discovered laws of nature are certain and true and apply throughout the cosmos? How can a few experiences and perspectives determine the outcome of all future experiences? Let's take some examples. We know that the sun will rise tomorrow; we know if I drop a stone it will fall to the earth; we know that if water gets cold enough, it will turn to ice. But how is such knowledge possible since the future can always be different from the past?

Kant's creative contribution to this complex problem in epistemology created a whole new approach to metaphysics. In fact he later wrote a shorter book to explain and defend his famous (and famously difficult) *Critique*. This shorter book he gave the modest title *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics Presenting Itself as a Science* (1784). In it Kant makes a move in metaphysics that affects the rest of Western philosophy. Instead of the traditional metaphysics focus on the object of knowledge—"being as such" (Aristotle)—Kant turned toward the knower. He insisted that we need to also study the limits and capacities of the knowing subject who seeks metaphysical understanding. He argued that the only possible ground for the universal and certain knowledge of the sciences, so revered in the age of Enlightenment, must lie in the very structures of the mind itself. Mere experiences cannot be enough to justify these laws of nature. What is more, Kant gave arguments for rejecting both the realism and the idealism of earlier philosophers. Instead, he insisted on two things at the same time: First, the mind is always active in the form of our perceptions, giving them such universal traits as space and time.

The common action of human reasoning at the formal level allows for the universal and certain knowledge sought by the philosopher of the world of experience. But this leads to a second principle: the objects that we study and experience through our sensations have a genuine reality that is outside of or beyond our experiences. This world of things outside of all possible experience Kant calls the **noumena**. We posit this noumenal world as the necessary basis of our experiences but can know nothing of its true qualities. Yet this world and its parts are real; the objects we experience are not pure illusions of the mind.

The truly important world for life, philosophy, and science, however, is not the noumena. We know nothing directly about these things in themselves (the noumena) apart from positing their existence as the ground of our experience. The most important world for humans is the everyday world we inhabit and experience. This world of experience and sensation he called **phenomena**. This is the world of our perspectives and experiences, the world that we can know past, present, and future. And because the mind gives reliable and universal form to these experiences, because the mind's work is transcendental to experience, we can know the present with certainty and predict elements of the future experience. We can know what will happen based on the laws of science. This world of phenomena is reliable and ordered throughout time and space because what we call "time and space" as experienced are given their structure by the human reason.

So let's get back to that old chestnut again, the falling tree that nobody hears. How would Kant respond to this problem? He would insist that what we call "the sound of a tree falling" is part of the world of experience. It is a phenomenon. If no one hears it, if there is no mind to experience it, then it just does not exist. At best we can talk about what might have happened if someone experienced it. Kant would agree that the falling tree would be accompanied by sound if there was a hearer, but otherwise it does not "make a sound" because there is no mind to have this particular sensation. Since a sound is a kind of human experience formed by the work of the mind, no sound happens if no one hears the tree fall.

Now that we know a bit more about Kant's views, what about the present and future of metaphysics? Has Kant undermined the

traditional approach for good? This turn Kant makes to the knowing subject did profoundly influence the whole tradition of philosophy after him. While Kant had many critics, and still does, the turn to the subject could not be ignored after him. It brought a whole new direction to the question of metaphysics in particular, and philosophy in general. A part of all serious philosophy from now on would need to include a critical element, one that reflected on the knower and possibility of the claim to know.

What is more, whole schools of philosophy after Kant would now devote themselves to the study of human being and existence. *Jean Paul Sartre* and **existentialism**, discussed in chapter 2, are just one example of this shift. For schools of thought like this, the older metaphysics is a dead end. The way forward for the philosophical study of being is to focus on human being in the world. In this way the questions about human being in the world have, for many philosophers today, taken over from the older focus on external ways of being in metaphysics. Those who make this human-focused move will rarely use the word "metaphysics" to describe their approach, preferring to use "ontology" instead. For some philosophers and many theologians today, ontology has come to mean this specific focus on human being, rather than being as such.

This turn to the subject, to the philosophical study of human being, has changed Christian theology, too. Traditional Christian theology relied on a few key philosophical ideas to develop and deepen its knowledge of God. Difficult questions of the full divinity of Jesus alongside his full humanity, or the doctrine of the Trinity, required borrowing, adapting, and shifting terms from traditional Greek metaphysics. Early Christian intellectuals said no to many elements of Greek culture and religion. Yet they did borrow ideas and terms like "person," "being," and "nature," often filling them with new meaning in order to explain their faith to a larger, learned, literate world. In this way metaphysics in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle was helpful to early Christian thought.

Since Kant, many Christian theologians have often been reticent to embrace metaphysics in its study of objective being. Instead, theologians and scholars of religion in general left behind metaphysics

as a partner and support for theology. They turned instead to philosophical work on ethics, meaning, and human being. While some theologians did not make this move, the change of direction is still with us for the most part.

So what is the future of metaphysics and ontology? Will the study of being as such ever connect again with existentialism and other philosophical movements that focus on human ontology? There is in our age a major revival of metaphysics in the light of current work in logical analysis. So the end has not yet come for the more objective approach. Despite these changes and diverse viewpoints, for anyone who studies it in our time, Kant's critical questions about the possibility and limits of metaphysics remain important for Christians and others alike.