Metaphysics is an area of philosophy that tries to answer the question, What is reality? Just as epistemology (or theory of knowledge) tries to determine what is knowledge and how that differs from mere opinion, so metaphysics seeks to discover general normative criteria for what is real and how that differs from what may seem to be real but actually is not.

The distinction between appearance and reality is already familiar to us through common sense and ordinary language. That is, we already know what someone means who says that the building appeared structurally sound, but was really severely damaged by termites. What philosophers try to do is explain this difference, why something is said to be real, or what counts as reality; in short, to state clearly the standards or criteria for what is real and what meets those standards or criteria.

Metaphysics is by far the most ancient branch of philosophy, beginning with the pre-Socratic Milesian philosopher-scientists (sixth century B.C.E.), who speculated on the “ageless, deathless” substance underlying the changing temporal world. Some thought this was water, others air, and still others felt there had to be more than one basic ingredient in order to account for the enormous variety of things in the world. For many centuries this occupied the central place in philosophy. Originally called First Philosophy, metaphysics was thought to be the necessary starting point or foundation for all the other areas of philosophy. Before one could reasonably speculate on the fate of the soul after death, for instance, one would first have to determine if there is a soul. In this sense metaphysics was seen as the most fundamental part of philosophy, presupposed by all the rest.

In the modern period (beginning with René Descartes in the seventeenth century), philosophers became increasingly suspicious of the overly ambitious and even pretentious nature of metaphysics. Discovering the ultimate nature of reality, they thought, may simply lie beyond the limits of mortal man. In the 1930s a group of philosophers known as the Logical Positivists
argued that all metaphysical statements were literally meaningless. Today
the question of metaphysics is being reexamined anew, and many philoso-
phers are returning to metaphysics as an indispensable part of the total task
of philosophy.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING
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