

# *Riddles of Existence*

## *A Guided Tour of Metaphysics*

Earl Conee and Theodore Sider

### **Introduction**

You have a choice before you. Will you continue reading this book? Take your time, make up your mind... OK, time's up. What is your decision?

If you have reached this sentence, your decision must have been *yes*. Now, think back to your decision. Was it a *free* decision? *Could* you have put the book down? Or did you *have* to keep reading?

Of course you could have put the book down; of course your decision was free. We human beings have free will.

Not so fast. We human beings are made of matter, tiny particles studied by the sciences. And the sciences, especially physics, discover laws of nature that specify where these particles must move. Given the forces acting on the particles, your body *had* to move the way it did, resulting in your continuing to read. How then was your decision free?

This is the problem of free will. It is a tough problem. We all believe that we have free will, and yet scientific laws govern the matter making up our bodies, determining what we will do next. So do we have free will? Chapter 6 discusses this problem in depth, and suggests a certain answer. But it is not so important to us that you agree with our answer. What we really hope is that, by reading this book, you come to appreciate the importance of such problems and develop reasoned opinions of your own.

Grappling with the problem of free will, as with most other metaphysical issues, requires no specialized knowledge. The conflict between free will and science lies in what we already know. What philosophy teaches us is how to reflect on what we already know in a particularly careful and thoughtful way. It is truly astonishing what problems emerge from this kind of reflection!

The problem of free will is just one example of a metaphysical problem. Broadly and vaguely speaking, metaphysics addresses fundamental questions about the nature of reality. What are the basic ingredients of reality? What is their ultimate nature? Could reality have been different? And where do human beings fit into reality? Indeed, why does reality contain anything at all?

Philosophers at colleges and universities teach and write about metaphysics. They pursue deep questions about life, meaning, and the world. Bookstores also have large sections called Metaphysics or Metaphysical Studies, containing books on deep questions about life, meaning, and the world. But these books are rarely written by academic philosophers. Why is that?

The main reason is that what most philosophers write is too technical and specialized. That's a shame. Philosophy is exciting and important, and understandable by anyone. There may also be another reason. Academic philosophers try to be as rational as they can in their writings. They criticize each others' ideas ruthlessly in pursuit of the truth. This makes for controversies rather than soothing certainties, which some people don't like. But that's also a shame. The controversies are fun and enlightening. Philosophy is an intellectual quest, with rigorous rules designed to help us figure out what is really true.

### *Who's It For?*

This book is for anyone interested in finding out about metaphysics. We take no background in philosophy for granted. The book is understandable without supplemental readings or instruction by a teacher.

As a textbook, it is flexible. The chapters are short and can be used independently of one another. The most accessible chapters come first; beyond that, the ordering has no great significance. In an introductory philosophy course, a section about metaphysics might use two or three chapters. A metaphysics course might use any or all of the chapters.

### *Who's It By?*

It's by a couple of professors of philosophy. We each wrote five chapters. Though we collaborated on them all, we did not try to make the book read as though it is the work of one author. We hope that stylistic differences make for a pleasant and stimulating variation in tone.

### *What Does It Cover?*

The first nine chapters take up major topics in metaphysics; the last chapter considers the question of what metaphysics is. The chapters deal selectively with their issues. The goal is to take a serious look at these topics, without exhausting them—or the reader! A brief list of suggested further readings appears at the end of each chapter.

**Chapter 1, Personal Identity** (Sider) Think back ten or twenty years into your past. You now have little in common with that earlier you. You look different. You think differently. And the matter now making you up is almost completely different. So why is that person *you*? What makes persons stay the same over time, despite such drastic changes?

**Chapter 2, Fatalism** (Conee) Fatalism claims that everything is fated to be exactly as it is. Why believe that? Over the centuries, there have been intriguing arguments proposed in favor of it. We investigate how well these arguments work.

**Chapter 3, Time** (Sider) Time can seem like the most mundane thing in the world, until you really start to think about it. Does time flow? If so, what could that mean? How fast does it flow, and can one travel back in time, against the current?

**Chapter 4, God** (Conee) Does God exist? Yes, some say; and they claim to prove it. We examine the proposed proofs.

**Chapter 5, Why Not Nothing?** (Conee) Why is there anything at all rather than nothing? Can we even understand this question? If so, what sort of answer might it have?

**Chapter 6, Free Will** (Sider) We all believe that we are free to act as we choose. But the business of science is to discover the underlying causes of things. Given science's excellent track record, it's a reasonable guess that it will one day discover the causes of human actions. But if our actions are caused by things science can predict and control, how can we have free will?

**Chapter 7, Constitution** (Sider) "If you hold a clay statue in your hand, you are actually holding *two* physical objects, a statue and a piece of clay. For

if you squash the statue, the statue is destroyed but the piece of clay keeps on existing.” This argument seems to establish a very strange conclusion: two different objects can share exactly the same location. Can that be correct? If not, where did the argument go wrong?

**Chapter 8, Universals** (Conee) Any two red apples have many things in common: most obviously, each is red and each is an apple. These things that they share, *redness* and *applehood*, are universals. Universals are very strange entities. Redness, for instance, seems to be in thousands of places at once; wherever any red object is located, redness itself is there. Do these universals really exist?

**Chapter 9, Necessity and Possibility** (Sider) Not all truths are created equal. It is true that Michael Jordan is a great basketball player, and it is true that all bachelors are unmarried. Although each of these is a truth, there is a big difference between them. The first truth might have been false: Jordan might have decided never to play basketball. But the second truth could not have been false: bachelors are necessarily unmarried. What makes these truths so different?

**Chapter 10, What is Metaphysics?** (Conee) After reading nine chapters about nine different metaphysical issues, you might expect to have a clear idea of what exactly metaphysics is. But it is remarkably difficult to identify a unifying feature common to every metaphysical topic. We examine some ideas about the nature of metaphysics itself.