

Science and the Possibility of Philosophy

An Interview with Peter Unger

HRP: Five years ago you wrote *Living High and Letting Die*, a book that Peter Singer called “one of the most significant works of ethics published this decade.” Since then, you’ve written mainly on metaphysics. Why the switch from ethics to metaphysics? What are you looking at in metaphysics now?

Unger: Well, first off, I should say that I’ve always thought of metaphysics as the most central part of philosophy. The nature of reality, the nature of me, how it is that I relate to the rest of reality (presuming solipsism is false), what of reality isn’t me, what am I like, can I have much of any idea what the rest of it is like. What are the main relations between me and the rest of it, presumably only part of which is made up of other beings like me. You, for example. It’s hard to be a Berkeleyan idealist. Most of what there is isn’t much like us: thinking beings and our mere ideas. There is something called matter, whatever that is. Mere matter. Insensate, unthinking matter. Part of what I am doing is trying to see what the problems are, how good of a systematic understanding we can develop. That’s what I’ve been working on for the last three or four years, and what I’m going to be working on for at least the next three or four years. I’m in the middle of writing this little book; at least I hope it’s little. I don’t want to impose on my friends a book that they’re probably just going to skim around in a bit and then feel guilty about for not really having read their friend’s book. (*Laughs*)



HRP: Some of this will have to do with what you are calling ‘Scientiphicalism’?

Unger: Yes, that’s right. A lot of it will have to do in a way with Scientiphicalism. Scientiphicalism, of course, is the metaphysic that nearly all educated Westerners carry around in their heads. It takes off from whatever was going on with Galileo:

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most of the world being matter, and so on. You just concentrate on its clearly physical properties, and anything that seems mainly humanly interesting—like the colors and smells and so forth—gets backed up into the mind and ignored, given an almost epiphenomenalist, second-class status. We sort of carry that around in our heads. The real workings of the world are going on in the basic, or basic enough, physical ‘whatever-it-is’. Quarks and leptons or whatever the next thing they will say it is— all of which are doing basically the same thing whether they are constituting anything interesting or not. Say, for example, you, or at least, your body. The only difference is that when these things are (as it seems to us) in interesting physical arrangements then they will serve to constitute these interesting complexes, like you. When they’re in other arrangements, they’re just boring, floating around in the air in interstellar space. They might constitute something semi-interesting, say, a rock. The only difference is in the spatio-temporal physical arrangement—and what’s the epiphenomenal upshot of that? All the whip hand is in the basic physical whatever. I think pretty much everybody carries that around in his or her head. At least all educated Westerners for the last couple of centuries or so. It has been the prevailing metaphysic in mainstream philosophy, which is sort of something like ‘analytic’ philosophy, ever since doing metaphysics became somewhat respectable again.

HRP: When would you say that was?

Unger: Well, somewhere around 1960, 1965, when Wittgenstein’s influence pretty much came to an end and he started to become a primarily historical figure, of primarily historical interest. Which he’s certainly been for the last 20 years—merely an historical figure. The famed and highly regarded philosophers who have an interest in something that’s supposed to be Wittgenstein now, mostly have an interest in Kripke’s ideas in that book of his on Wittgenstein and rule-following. If it’s really Kripke and he didn’t get Wittgenstein right (and who knows what it is to get Wittgenstein right), then there’s very little being done with Wittgenstein indeed.

HRP: Except for a lot of interpretive work.

Unger: Yes, just as is true for Nietzsche, and Kant, and Hume, and Descartes, and so forth. He’s become a historical figure. Most philosophers don’t take his questions as questions for us to work on. I mean, one of his main points was not to do metaphysics anymore. That was all supposed to be an illusion. Or, really, any systematic philosophical work of any sort. But that did fade out, some decades ago. Since then, a lot of work has been done in metaphysics, or in areas of philosophy that rely on metaphysics—philosophy of mind, even meta-ethics. And the metaphysics is basically this Scientiphical (as I spell it with a ‘ph’, really for philosophical reasons) interpretation of whatever it is that science, mainly physics (presumably the most basic science), is supposed to deliver. We carry this around in our heads, and now the most influential people in the philosophical academy take it for granted and hardly even bother to espouse it, but it’s there. The general idea is: whatever is real and isn’t physical ‘supervenes’ on the physical—whatever that means, and nobody really knows what it means. Each person has a slightly different interpretation, so that someone who looks carefully at the other guy’s interpretation finds something wrong with it, but something else that is right. Whatever it is, it’s not very different from the old epiphenomenalism. It’s a classier way of looking at things that is supposed to avoid certain things that were taken to be mistakes of the

old epiphenomenalism.

So, that's the prevalent view. There are many problems with it, once you start thinking about it hard. First, there's a difficulty in getting to an understanding of what the 'physical' is. Most people think, "oh, that's fine, it's just this 'supervenience' thing that we need to get clear on." Goodness knows, I don't have any clue *about* what the supervenience thing is. But, the more basic issue is this: People had better get clearer on what the physical is—on what is this more basic reality that all else, everything else that's "concrete," anyway, is supposed to supervene on. We need to get clearer on its nature—well, its "intrinsic nature," to use a fancy expression. And, nowadays, hardly anyone in metaphysics works on that at all. It's a very bad situation, I think. Here's part of why I think it's so bad, which should give you

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a feeling for what I mean. Well, we can't really be clear about what's physical once we've moved 'qualities'—something like phenomenal color, roughly, away from the physical world. That's what Galileo did, and everyone since—Descartes, Locke and so

forth. We can't really get a conception that adequately distinguishes between a world of, on the one hand, Newtonian particles, little material spheres colliding with one another, attracting and repelling one other within space and, on the other hand, a sort of 'Swiss-cheesy' material plenum or field with little spherical vacuums, perfectly empty bubbles. In this world, the bubbles' trajectories are said to be timed perfectly parallel to trajectories of particles in the Newtonian world. The bubbles' trajectories are supposed to be determined by the undulation propensities of the plenum. The upshot of this is that the bubbles go up and down, left and right, wherever they go. So have we really conceived two different worlds? Or do we just have two different vocabularies, a plenum-style vocabulary and a particle-style vocabulary? What's the real difference? Both are somehow too abstract, too devoid of quality, for us to have in mind anything definite at all. In a way, even in the simplest cases of having physical worlds, we really don't have any idea of what we are talking about. The alternative, of course, is to reverse what Galileo, Descartes, and Locke have foisted on us and get back to a picture that gets some 'quality' back into what is supposed to be physical—and run with that for a while. That's the first thing to do.

HRP: You have a paper, "Free Will and Scientiphicalism," that addresses some of the issues that arise with the adoption of a Scientiphicalist world-view. How do you think your work will fit into the general debate over whether reasons explanations can and/or should be reduced to causal explanations? Do you see your work addressing this question directly?

Unger: I think that, if we have any choice in the matter, (as we better, if we are to make any sense of most of human life, and not just ethics—including that but other things as well), we better have, within our mental power, a power to choose among

alternatives. And this looks as if it can't possibly be understood as any sort of physical power, however 'physical' is construed. There has to be something beyond what most philosophers think of as causation, which they think of as event causation. They think that this 'event causation' is somehow more in line with everything being basically physical or other stuff supervening on the physical, and so forth. Actually, it is somewhat dubious that event causation has much to do with physical goings on. Many people have noticed this, going back at least to Bertrand Russell, who wrote extensively in support of the view that, in anything like physics as it had been developing, the notion of causation really has no place. We often think that we understand cause and effect by looking at science. In science, there is supposed to be a directionality from cause to effect; there is supposed to be an asymmetry. The cause is supposed to be prior to and productive of an event. What does this have to do with science? In science you have Newtonian particles mutually attracting one other through the evolution of time. Or an electron and a proton repelling each other over time. What is going on here? Do we say that 'the cause' of this electron's going toward this proton is the proton's 'pulling it' or something? None of it really makes much sense. We can talk that way, but we feel that it is really a kind of nonsense. It's a projection of some other thing onto what really doesn't have much to do with cause or effect at all. I think Russell was right. But more than that, I think that the very root idea of cause that we best understand is pretty much the way that Berkeley said it was. Everybody now thinks that Berkeley was this great figure but no one takes anything he said too seriously—he's read just for historical interest, unlike Hume, who is said to have set the agenda. But actually Berkeley should be taken as having set part of the agenda too. This is the idea: the real idea of causation that we understand best is that of an intentional agent doing something that exercises its will and intelligence. That is what we really understand. My causing it to be the case that I imagine a red disk, or a blue disk, or whatever. There you have something that you can really understand as someone bringing about a change—maybe in this case being just a change in his own mind. The other thing, the physical, is just these inert 'whatevers' bouncing around in the world. There is supposed to be some event. Well, is the event really *productive* of some other event? It doesn't really make much sense. We start treating the ones that are called causes as little 'semi-agents' or something like that. Now, it may be dubious how often this root notion of causation, agent causation, really is instantiated in the real world. Maybe the real world is a kind of sad place, which is all just illusion, and there is just a sort of flow of the physical. We hope not, and it seems reasonable to think not. We really believe that we make a difference: we believe that we do make changes, that we cause there to be certain changes. I use the word 'make'—in most instances it will work just as well as the verb 'cause'. Cause to happen; make happen.

HRP: Often 'make' is tied up with purposeful action. To speak of particles in that way often seems inappropriate or at least metaphorical.

Unger: Sure, purposeful action. Someone making a dinner, making a bowl—causing the bowl to be. And, though I'm not a believer, God making the world, God making people. The root understanding of cause, I feel, has to do with this idea of an agent making something happen. Looking at the problem the other way seems to start off getting the problem backwards.

HRP: It's interesting, because people generally take causal explanation to be

the better understood case, with reason explanations being somehow more complicated.

Unger: I think we generally understand reasons explanations better. It's just that we have a very hard time understanding how reasons are going to fit in with what we take the world *really* to be at bottom, which is this Scientiphical business, the physical goings on. How are reasons explanations supposed to fit into this picture, on their own terms? That is the question that is hard to answer.

HRP: We've discussed some apparent problems with Scientiphicalism or a bottom-level scientific understanding. One question I have is how do you understand the 'success of science', the way it seems to do many things well? How do you understand its coming to reign as the predominant metaphysic? It seems to have quite a bit going for it, in that it allows us to manipulate our environment and allows us to do a lot of things that previously no one would have thought possible.

Unger: Well, I think it has to do with two things. I do think that scientists are talking about a reality, most of which is beyond them and us and our ideas. There's *something* right about the Scientiphical metaphysic; I am what is called a 'realist' about a lot of things physical. It's hard to know what I'm then a realist about. Let me say on the other side, though, that while it's very much out of fashion now, if you ask philosophically inclined physicists what their conception of what they're doing is, a fair number of them *won't* be realists. Even Einstein thought that pretty much most of science was just the setting up of equations that were incredibly useful tools for predicting experience and manipulating the world. To a large degree, that was very often Bertrand Russell's position. Einstein read Russell, and I think he seconded Russell's notions. Now, I don't agree with Russell. I'm not a Phenomenalist, which Russell was then, but I'm not exactly sure what I am when I say I'm a realist about the physical world. And how it is that I'm supposed to differ from these Phenomenalists.

HRP: About what do you disagree when you say that you disagree with the Phenomenalists?

Unger: I don't think that all the physical world is, is some sort of construction out of our experiences, or sense data, or perceptions. I *also* don't think that the physical reality that the physicists are saying something about is a "construction" out of perceptible objects, that is, out of only those things, like tables and chairs, and electron microscopes, and the pictures these microscopes take—the things we can perceive directly, or directly enough. So I also disagree with Instrumentalism—a less extreme, less mentalistic cousin of Phenomenalism. Here's something interesting that's very, very different from what I believe: A very distinguished philosopher of science at Princeton, Bas van Fraassen, believes in God and *doesn't* believe in electrons. Yes, I believe in electrons, but I don't really believe in God. Still, I'm not exactly sure what it is that I believe in when I believe in electrons. I'm trying to get a better idea; that's what I'm doing now.

HRP: Somewhat of a general question now. You've said that metaphysics is more central to philosophy than ethics. I guess one question that seems fair is: why study philosophy at all? Is it just interesting? If it is just interesting, then why is it okay to study it before we deal with some of the other ostensibly

more pressing problems in the world, such as those raised in your book *Living High and Letting Die*?

Unger. Without getting too tricky about the whole business, I think it is much more important (let's suppose that some things are more important than others), to do what we can for people in direst need than to pursue art or metaphysics. Thus, during the last three or four years and probably during the next three or four years I'll be doing something that is less important than what I should be doing, than helping the people in direst need, which each of us can do a lot about. In this way, I'm not very surprising. People aren't that good. When it's conspicuously pushed in our face about what there really is to be done, what the world is really like, then we tend to be more responsive to what really is important. If I were thrown down in the middle of the worst sorts of preventable African horror-shows, and I were unable to leave, given a choice between spending a few hours a day working on metaphysics or spending a few hours doing something about it, in that situation, I'd probably spend a few hours a day doing something about it. But that is, as I bring out in my book, very pale and removed from me here. I'm not there. It's hard for me to be very much impressed with it most of the time, and it's extremely easy for me to be much more taken by other things, most of the time.

HRP: That's the situation most of us are in most of the time.

Unger. Sure. One of the things that is important to remember is that if you are living in a country where most of the people are committed to these sorts of things all around you, then it's a lot easier too. But if everybody around you is involved with getting a nice apartment set up, having people over to dinner, and so forth, then it's harder. People on the whole do pretty much the same things and live pretty much the same lives as other people in their society. Pretty much most of my life is like most college professors and other professional people living in nice urban neighborhoods, and so forth.

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HRP: Liam Murphy has just written a book, *Moral Demands in Non-Ideal Theory*, in which he addresses some of these concerns. I was wondering if you had any thoughts about his approach to these issues and whether or not you think his position might be a way out of the predicament, so to speak.

Unger. Well, first off, I must admit I haven't carefully gone through the whole of the book. I plan to teach a course on it next spring, but I haven't gone through the finished product completely. That said, I can certainly see a lot of good things in it, even just from having looked at the draft chapters. Still, I can't believe that his position is right. I think that my position is closer to the truth. His position feels nicer, because it's not as demanding, and so in a way I'd like his position to be right. Look, here's Liam's view—its main thrust anyway: Each of us should do her "fair share" to lessen the suffering and loss of the worst off folks—the malnourished,

sickly, “third world” kids, for instance. So, each of us should do only as much as would be needed from her *given that* everyone else who’s well off were doing what’s needed from *them*. So, if you guys *don’t* give through UNICEF, Oxfam, and so on, the pretty big amount needed from you—and it’s pretty big—that doesn’t mean that I then have to give almost everything I’ve got. On my view, of course, it does mean I’ve got to go “all out.” So, what he “wants” from each of us is much more approachable. The thing now puzzling me with what I take, or took, to be the right position is this: up to the point where we can say it’s really true that you *can* do things to help, it’s really wrong not to do as much as you can to alleviate the serious suffering that is going on. But, It could be that, to a much greater extent than I allowed, just implicitly, well, it could be psychologically impossible for most well-off people to do very much. It could be that for most people, given the actual situation that they’re in, and given the actual mind they have, they really can’t do much more than what they are doing. Maybe most of them can’t even do as much as Liam’s system would require.

HRP: That would be an empirical question, I suppose.

Unger: Yes, that’s an empirical question, and I don’t really know what the answer is. It’s largely empirical, but it’s also partly philosophical, in terms of determining what really is meant by what people can and cannot do. But a large part is an empirical question, the answer to which I really don’t know.

HRP: On a slightly different topic, returning to what you are working on now, you have a recent paper “The Survival of the Sentient,” in which you write “to better understand ourselves, we must continue to think of ourselves as being, most essentially, thinking and feeling individuals.” Could you speak a little about the ideas behind this quote and in general how this relates to what we were discussing earlier regarding Scientiphicalism?

Unger: Well, the main opponent there, in that paper anyhow, is the biological approach, which may go back to Aristotle. I just took on the contemporary guys, who argue that we are more basically or essentially *biological* beings than that we are psychological, thinking, or feeling beings. On my view, and lots of others too, of course, the psychological is essential and the biological is really secondary. Suppose that you could replace my biological parts, particularly those of my brain insofar as it supports thinking, with some non-organic but causally just as effective little bits—tiny bit by tiny bit, gradually. Each week, maybe each day, replace one percent of my brain with an inorganic fancy material that would continue to interact with the rest of my brain so that altogether the bits would support the kind of thinking that I regularly engage in, that I enjoy and suffer and so forth. This would go on for one hundred days or so. In the end, you have a being that thinks, with a biological shell. Take the inorganic matter, now functioning as my brain did before, out of the biological shell and hook it up to the appropriate sort of vat. Then have a steamroller or something go over the body. I would there exist as a non-biological being. I would be the self-same entity that always had *my* power to think and *my* powers of experience. If my life would be worth anything, then I would on occasion manifest these powers, so that I would sometimes think and would sometimes experience.

HRP: It seems something like a functionalist interpretation?

Unger: Well no, I mean it doesn’t say anything about *why* it is—I’m just saying that

suppose it is right that you *could* do this sort of operation. But at least in terms of the concepts, it seems that it would still be me. It would just be good therapy of a certain sort, to overcome certain kinds of degenerative disease, or whatever.

HRP: I guess that's what I mean by a functionalist interpretation, in that what is preserved through time, what is you now as opposed to earlier, really is this system, or something of that sort.

Unger: Whatever it is that has *your* power to think and experience. I'm not sure that the world does work that way, but if this sort of thing would keep waking up and experiencing, it really would exhibit the same categorical disposition to think. It would be you. This is a partly empirical question, whether you could replace the biology by the non-biology. But as far as the concepts go, it seems that the psychological powers are the important ones, not the biological powers.

HRP: This example raises a general question about philosophy and particularly the use of examples in philosophy—deadly trolley cars, brains in vats, and the like. You rely on them heavily in *Living High and Letting Die* and in your more recent work as well. I guess I would be interested if you could speak on the general practice of using examples: what type of information do these sorts of examples provide, how should they enter into philosophical argument, and so forth? What do we learn from examples of this sort?

Unger: I think there are very few rules of thumb that are very useful regarding the use of examples. One should evaluate each case on its own merits. Here's one rule: when you have cases that seem ingenious and philosophically very interesting, very often something else is going on than what you think the example is supposed to be showing. In very boring cases, very clear cases, you can trust your response to the cases. The boring ones you can trust. A businessman kills his main competitor because he wants to succeed at all costs. Did he do something wrong? Of course. It is a boring case. The same holds for other branches of philosophy as well. Here's a case of a ball sitting on a table. Is this also a case of a table being under and or supporting a ball? Yes, seems so. Fine; boring. There is not much going on. When the cases are more interesting, it is hard to know when it is doing something of philosophical interest, or when it is doing something else.

HRP: So knowing that, how do you proceed? In a couple of your more recent papers you offer many of what must be called 'ingenious' examples, such as the one in which your pet is slowly made more non-organic, and we are asked to consider our attitudes toward the pet. How do you deal with this problem?

Unger: You can't trust them very much. It really is the best I can do. The cases seem to be examples that may be illuminating rather than distorting, but you can't be that sure. And thus you can't be that sure of your argument, insofar as it rests on them. You shouldn't be all that confident, and so I'm not. (*Laughs*)

HRP: On something of a different topic, but a topic that is raised by our earlier discussion of current work done on Wittgenstein, what are your thoughts on the historical study of philosophy in relation to what is more like looking at particular problems somewhat apart of the historical context that might surround them? One question that relates to this: how should departments prepare students?

Unger: I think you can learn enormous amounts from and should continually go back to the generally recognized canonical philosophers. For me, and I think for most people nowadays, I get more out of and find more accessible people in the modern era—Descartes and so forth—than the ancients and medievals. Their whole outlook is *so* different from ours that it is hard to know what they are getting at, at least at times. A brilliant colleague of mine, Kit Fine, seems to find a lot in Aristotle that is metaphysically very interesting and important. Personally, I get more from the more modern writers, even from Locke, who is a terrible writer. I think that you have to go back to these guys; they really have got the big problems. A bad thing professionally is that nowadays, there's been a split between people on the one hand who take on the historical scholarship, and they get *very* scholarly, into the nuances of textual interpretation and so forth, and those on the other hand who are trying to do philosophy on their own bottom. You don't get enough of a mesh. The older generation had people who were doing work on the canonical figures—maybe it wasn't the greatest and most textually pure—but it was interesting and it was stimulating. One of my teachers, Peter Strawson, was good at this. For the most part, though, there's been this division. The scholars are completely involved in this very close textual work, and the others really don't get enough from the canonical figures. It seems like a bad trend. When the old generation goes out, for the most part you will just have the very scholarly scholars just talking to each other, and the

other people who try to always start from square one. It seems like a bad trend.

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HRP: It does seem a shame, reinventing the wheel.

Unger: Well, if you're doing really *serious* philosophy, you really need to go back to the historical figures. You want to be informed by people who know what is going on; you can stand on their shoulders in order to see more. I am trying to do this in my

work because, let's face it, these historical figures are far greater thinkers than I could ever hope to be. So, I'm trying to go back into the history, to learn from those long dead guys what are the really central issues. I do some of that in, say, my paper, "The Mystery of the Physical".

There is another sad trend: the sameness of what is considered serious by dominant philosophical groups. Everybody is something like a Scientiphicalist. What does that mean? One thing it means is that you have virtually nothing in the way of Idealism of any sort, virtually nothing in the way of any serious dualism, nothing different at all. It's pretty much all the same; there are only little wrinkles of difference. Everyone is accepting the same sort of basic world outlook, where the

physical is pretty much all that there is, maybe all there is, at least all that is really serious. And what is that? Well, it's not essentially mental, sometimes it gets together and constitutes something mental—but whatever it is, that's it. There's no real diversity of viewpoints. And that's unfortunate. Here's something a little interesting: I've been invited to a conference on the metaphysics of human beings, which is going to meet this summer. Most of the senior people who will be there are theists. I might be the only atheist amongst these senior people, maybe even the only non-theist. Now, this *is* a group where there is some real diversity of viewpoints. They really do have some of these other views as their metaphysical outlook. Bob Adams from Yale is going to be there, and I've heard that he really is an idealist like Berkeley. Unfortunately he hasn't published on this, at least not to date. There are a few British theists who have actually published on these different ways of looking at the world. And, some of them are at Oxford, like John Foster, who's a sort of Berkeleyan idealist, and Richard Swinburne, who's a substantial Dualist, somewhat like Descartes. But it really is mainly just the theists who are articulating these views. And, though they're at Oxford, these guys are very much mere outsiders. Their work has virtually no influence. In fact, it's not their theism that does them in. No: it's much more the fact that they're trying to advance views that disagree, in a basic and wholesale way, with the dominant Scientiphicalism, with what, for the last 50 years or so, has been the well-entrenched same-old, same-old. And, that's *very* unfortunate.

Anyhow, there should *also* be plenty of non-theists developing deeply diverse views. And, these deeply alternative non-theists—well, a few of them, at least—should be taken seriously, very seriously, by the dominant Scientiphical guys. Then present-day philosophy would be more interesting.

HRP: Why do you think that these views are so unpopular? Do you think that it is just that people feel that the views—idealism, dualism, and so forth—have been (or are in the process of being) defeated? Is it just that people think they are false?

Unger: I just think it's the times. Different things are popular at different times. Different things become popular; we get in a groove and roll for a half-century or more. One thing about the current trend, one part that has been in force since Moore and Russell revolted against Bradley and Hegel's absolute idealism—the whole world as an immaterial One, a single, immaterial entity—is the development of this 'common sense' thing. More and more, in the last fifty years, there is the working assumption prevalent in the dominant groups of academic philosophy that common sense has to be right 99% of the time. We can make a few little adjustments, but we have to get our philosophy set up so that propositions of common sense fall out as theorems.

HRP: Not too unlike the use of examples, where what we appeal to is our 'intuitive' response to cases.

Unger: Sure. Since Moore, everybody has to care a lot about common sense or is just considered a nut case. That's been an unfortunate thing. A second thing is that we take science to really tell us what the world is like. Science delivers the goods; we'll just say a few secondary things about what things are. But our priority is to agree with common sense. This is a relatively new thing for philosophy.

HRP: Definitely a more limited role for philosophy.

Unger: We can't let philosophy win too much, because common sense has to win. And you can't tell too much about what the world is like, because you are not a scientist. You are backed into a corner. You can do ethics, because there is no science of ethics. But it's hard to know what you are really doing, because *maybe* there are no facts there. *Anyway*, if you're trying to do metaphysics, you really can't try to do too much. You really are backed into a corner. ϕ