

Stephen Mumford. *Metaphysics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press 2012. 144 pp. \$11.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780199657124).

In *Metaphysics: A Very Short Introduction*, Stephen Mumford provides a lively and accessible introduction to many central issues in contemporary analytic metaphysics. Mumford does so by giving an overview of the issues themselves, popular responses to them, as well as prominent concerns that have been raised against those responses. As part of the ‘Very Short Introductions’ series, this book has two potential target audiences: (i) members of the general public who are merely curious about metaphysics, and (ii) university-level students enrolled in an introductory philosophy course or introductory metaphysics course. Since a great many philosophical issues—especially in metaphysics—can be quite technical, abstract, and hard to parse for the uninitiated, the target audiences must be kept in mind when writing (and reviewing) an introductory text such as this one. Mumford’s eloquent writing style and competence with a wide variety of topics make him well suited to write a book such as this.

Mumford approaches the task of introducing the reader to discussions in metaphysics in an insightful way—via a series of pertinent questions. Each chapter is dedicated to addressing one of these topical questions, and relevant tangents, in roughly ten pages. The topics explored in its chapters are as follows: Chapter 1 (‘What is a table?’) focuses on the nature of substances, ordinary objects, and bundle theory; Chapter 2 (‘What is a circle?’) focuses on universals, properties, nominalism, Plato’s theory of forms, and the Aristotelian theory of forms; Chapter 3 (‘Are wholes just sums of parts?’) focuses on mereology, mereological simples, as well as reductionism and emergentism; Chapter 4 (‘What is change?’) focuses on persistence conditions, with an eye on the dispute between perdurantism and endurantism, and the problem of change; Chapter 5 (‘What is a cause?’) focuses on causation, in particular counterfactual dependence theories of causation; Chapter 6 (‘How does time pass?’) focuses on the philosophy of time and the nature of temporal passage, with an emphasis on the debate between presentism and eternalism, but the growing block theory is discussed as well; Chapter 7 (‘What is a person?’) focuses on personal identity, psychological continuity, bodily continuity, and the transporter problem; Chapter 8 (‘What is possible?’) focuses on modality and possible worlds; Chapter 9 (‘Is nothing something?’) focuses on the nature of nothingness; and, Chapter 10 (‘What is metaphysics?’) focuses on metametaphysics, and seeks to defend the relevance and significance of contemporary metaphysics. In addition to the ten chapters, the reader will also find an introduction at the beginning of the book—which nicely sets the stage for the reader and enables her to appreciate why the book has been structured as it has—and a list of potential further readings at the end of the book for the interested reader. The list of further readings is short, but usefully divided between other introductory texts and non-introductory texts. Most of the latter are dedicated to one particular issue, and while all are worth reading, some are quite advanced.

Let me now comment on a few aspects of this book in greater detail.

Mumford employs the topical questions to great effect: he not only uses them to focus the attention of the reader on the overarching issue to be addressed in a chapter, but the topical question of the subsequent chapter is often raised as a kind of follow-up question to the discussions in the

present chapter. This ties the chapters together nicely, gives the text a real sense of flow, and makes it highly readable as a whole.

Mumford almost always explicates key terms when they're first used, or within a few paragraphs of their first usage. But, given the target audience of the *Very Short Introduction* series, I worry that there are a few instances that some readers may nevertheless be left slightly confused. For instance, while Mumford explains the concept of other possible worlds in the paragraph immediately after its first usage, it isn't entirely clear why ersatz realism is called *ersatz* realism. This isn't a devastating criticism, though—few (or perhaps none at all) will pause and head scratch at the introduction of such terms. As with any book of this sort, there's a trade-off to be made between brevity and hand-holding. More often than not, Mumford strikes the right balance. It should also be noted that Mumford employs very few technical terms in his presentation of the material, avoiding them where possible—given the target audience, this proves to be an asset.

Mumford frequently employs illustrative examples which are likely to be easily grasped by the target audience. Some of these are drawn from popular culture; for instance in Chapter 7, *Star Trek* is used to flesh out the transporter problem. Elsewhere, more everyday examples are used to great effect, for example in his discussion of mereology Mumford employs a mobile phone to contrast the features of parts and the features of a whole.

Not every position or issue can be touched on in a short book like this one. For instance, the Parfitian survival-not-identity solution to the transporter problem is not covered in Chapter 7 ('What is a person?'). But, in a way, this omission—which some may find striking—represents a virtue of this text: to outline and assess the Parfitian survival-not-identity line, Mumford would have had to either (i) shoehorn the material into the chapter (and thereby leave it under explained), or (ii) expand the chapter significantly (in order to appropriately explain the arguments and consequences of it for the uninitiated reader). Neither option is attractive. That said, Chapter 7 does feature a minor tangent into the philosophy of mind (Descartes and dualism). But, given the topic of this chapter is personal identity, it's not wholly inappropriate to include some discussion of such issues when assessing psychological continuity. Mumford also digresses into the philosophy of mind in chapter 3 ('Are wholes just sums of parts?'), when he touches on reductionism and emergentism. Again, this tangent isn't wholly out of place as some may worry about our minds when considering a person, the parts of a person, and the physical whole of a person. The philosophical work of Plato and Aristotle, and how their work has shaped current debates in metaphysics, are similarly peppered throughout this book. As such, some may worry that Mumford wanders down too many tangents for such a short text. But as members of the general public who are keen to learn about metaphysics form part of the target audience, I suspect they would find these tangents rewarding. University-level students enrolled in an introductory course may as well, but this might hinge on their interest in the issues and how they connect with the other course material being covered. At a minimum, though, both these groups would benefit from knowing a little bit about how prominent historical figures have influenced contemporary discussions as well as about the interplay between discussions in metaphysics and other areas of philosophy. So, we ought not to fault Mumford for including and excluding the material which he did. The fact that each chapter is limited to roughly ten pages is a testament to Mumford's ability to succinctly survey much of the topical terrain.

Some may suspect that what is the final chapter, Chapter 10 (What is metaphysics?), could have naturally been the first chapter in a text such as this. After all, we might think it fruitful to outline what metaphysics is before tackling various metaphysical issues. But because of the way in which Mumford has structured the prior chapters, covering this material last makes a great deal of sense as he's able to point to the preceding nine chapters as examples of what metaphysicians do—the reader is, at this stage, able to recognize the commonalities held by these topics.

There are a great many introductory metaphysics texts. Some are quite short while others rather long. Nevertheless, *Metaphysics: A Very Short Introduction* has its place within this crowded space and instructors would do no wrong to list it as recommended supplementary reading on their Introduction to Metaphysics syllabi. It's also important to be mindful that while there may be many wrong ways to write a book like this, there are also many right ways. The question I sought to answer here in this review isn't 'How else could this content be usefully presented?' but, rather, 'Does Mumford present this material clearly, engagingly, and succinctly?' To this question, the answer is yes.

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