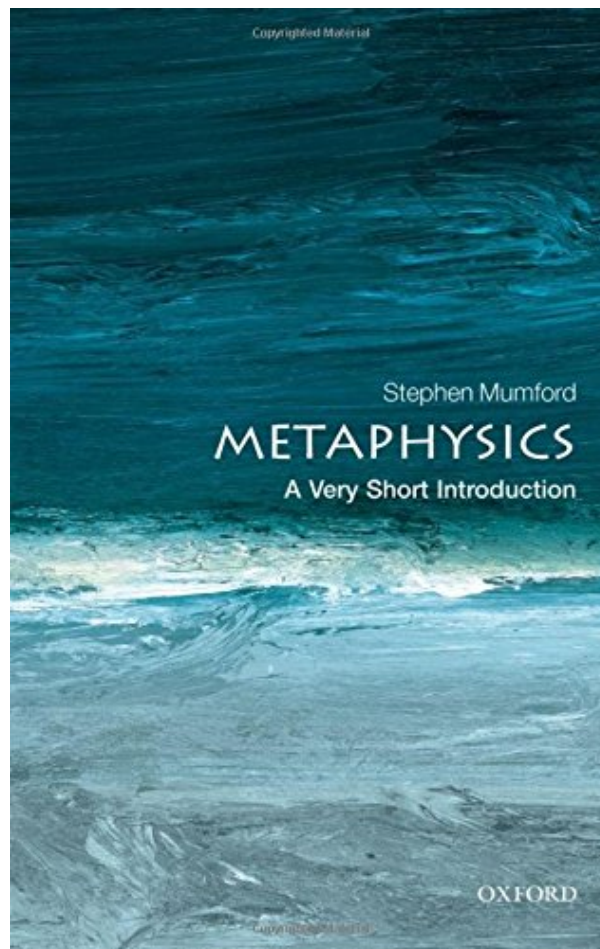
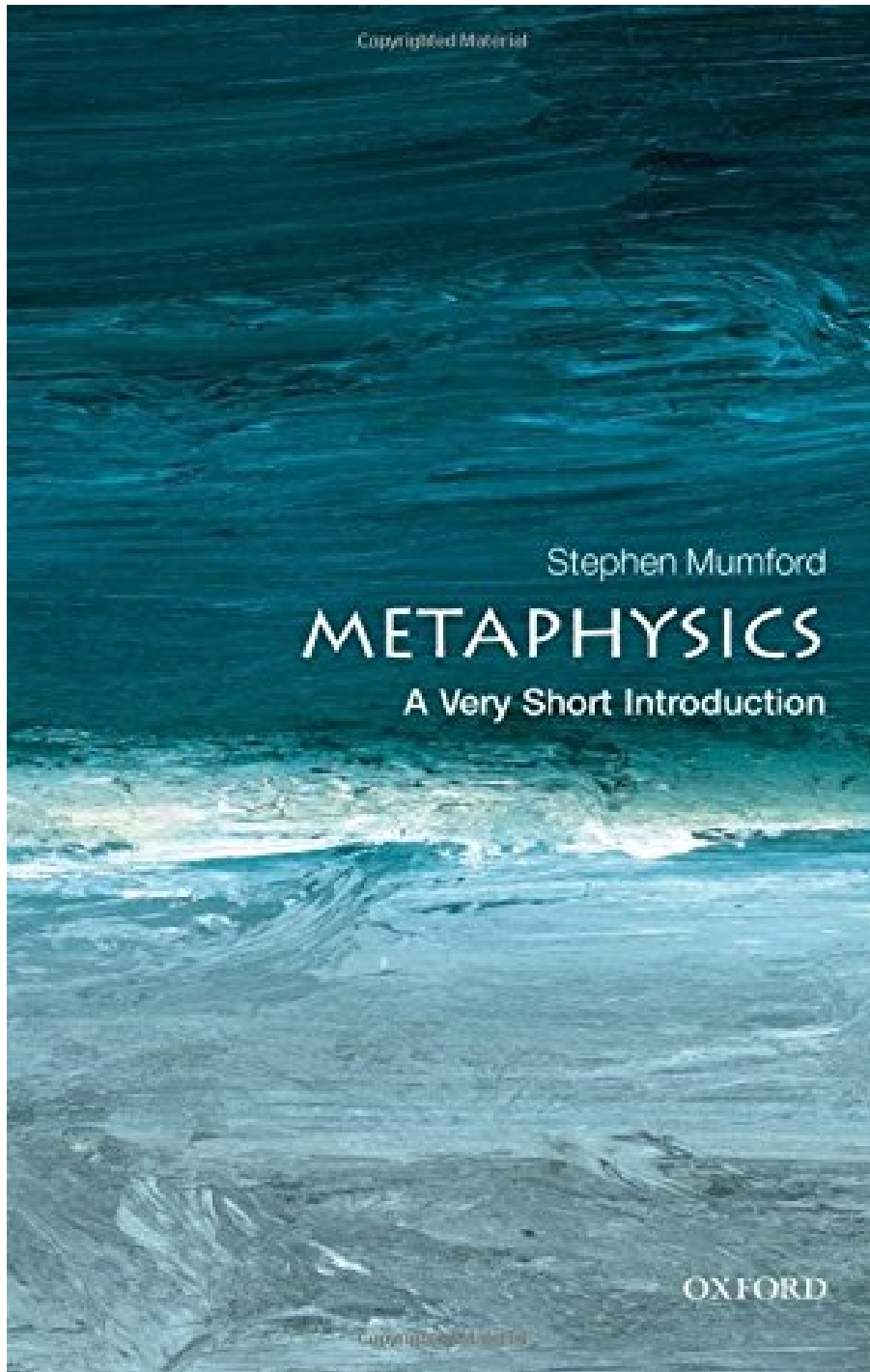


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## Review

It manages to be jargon-free without sacrificing rigour and complexity. *Times Higher Education Supplement*

## About the Author

Stephen Mumford is Professor of Metaphysics at the Department of Philosophy, University of Nottingham, where he is also Head of the School of Humanities and Dean of the Faculty of Arts. His most famous book is *Dispositions*, but he also authored *Laws in Nature* and *Watching Sport: Aesthetics, Ethics and Emotions*. He has also written extensively for general readers, including articles in *Times Higher Education* magazine, and he is a frequent public speaker.

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# **METAPHYSICS: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION (VERY SHORT INTRODUCTIONS) BY STEPHEN MUMFORD PDF**

Metaphysics is traditionally one of the four main branches of philosophy, alongside ethics, logic and epistemology. It is an area that continues to attract and fascinate many people, even though it is generally thought to be highly complex and abstract. For some it is associated with the mystical or religious. For others it is known through the metaphysical poets who talk of love and spirituality. This Very Short Introduction goes right to the heart of the matter, getting to the basic and most important questions of metaphysical thought in order to understand the theory: What are objects? Do colors and shapes have some form of independent existence? Is the whole just a sum of the parts? What is it for one thing to cause another rather than just being associated with it? What is possible? Does time pass? By using simple questions to initiate thought about the basic issues around substance, properties, changes, causes, possibilities, time, personal identity, nothingness, and consciousness, Stephen Mumford provides a clear and down-to-earth path through this analytical tradition at the core of philosophical thought.

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## Most helpful customer reviews

47 of 49 people found the following review helpful.

One of the best general introductions on metaphysics...

By ewomack

This book won't make anyone more popular at parties, but it will exercise that mostly underutilized organ that nature took great care to encase in a thick skull. Ultimately, that philosophical subject known as "Metaphysics" will tax the most sharpened of wits because it contains a litany of unanswered questions. Those looking for answers should consult math book teachers' guides. Worse still, most of these questions lead to only more questions. Even seemingly infantile questions such as "what is a table?" or "what is

change?" do not have simple non-controversial answers. On closer inspection it turns out that reality contains numerous nearly incomprehensible elements that have dodged inquisitive minds for millennia. And, arguably, throughout those same millennia it has produced just about nothing of indubitable utility. The questions and controversies just keep coming. So why would anyone in their right mind bother with this evasive, frustrating and ancient subject? This is basically what this short book, aptly titled "Metaphysics: A Very Short Introduction," attempts to answer.

In the true spirit of metaphysics each chapter takes the form of a question. So, whether intentionally or not, readers will find themselves asking questions over and over again merely by perusing the book. Even the introduction asks "What is an introduction?" Here a question, there a question, everywhere a question, question. Structurally, the book attempts to make its ominous subject more accessible by "doing" metaphysics rather than merely explaining it right up front. So no turgid delineations of the epochal history of this topic clutter the text - plenty of other books do that. Instead, individual questions and subjects get asked and discussed one by one, beginning with "what is a table?" This unearths the topic of just what comprises an individual object, or a particular, including its properties or qualities. And do objects consist of a substratum or of a bundle of these properties? And where particulars dwell so do universals, as the next chapter "what is a circle?" discusses. The book continues with chapters on parts and wholes, change, causation, the passing of time, personhood, possibility and nothingness. The billion dollar question "what is metaphysics?" doesn't get asked until the final chapter.

Along the way the subject matter remains the focus, not a list of big names, though some of those inevitably appear such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Locke, Mill, Wittgenstein, Lewis, Armstrong, Kant and of course Captain Kirk. These names only appear in relation to the ideas outlined in the current chapter. Plus, many "isms" appear, all of which receive clear explanations, such as "reductionism," "emergentism," "holism," "presentism," "eternalism," and others. None of these remain difficult to understand in the context of this introductory book. No prior knowledge required.

Most chapters conclude the same way: inconclusively. Do placebos prove causation? Maybe. Does time flow in a sequence? Probably, but maybe. Does personhood arise from psychological continuity over time? Or should bodily continuity count as well? Do other "possible worlds" exist - really concretely exist, in a David Lewis sense - to account for contingencies? Do negative properties exist? Must they exist? They make for a messy metaphysics, but perhaps reality is messy? As anyone can guess, the words "yes," "no" and "without a doubt" appear very infrequently in this book. Here uncertainties reign.

The final chapter defends metaphysics against the charges of being pointless and unscientific. It truly may seem pointless, even after reading this book. But this bizarre subject can nonetheless has the power to extend one's perspective and to introduce new ways of thinking about the world and reality. And science often does the same thing. But this chapter does state explicitly that metaphysical theories do not stand or fall by observation. This may cause many to pause and wonder: so how does one accept or reject metaphysical theories? The chapter may not answer this understandable question to everyone's satisfaction. One answer provided is "on the basis of reasoning alone," which may furrow some skeptical brows. Though no one should leave this book questioning the value or purpose of metaphysics, this final chapter, in some ways, feels as inconclusive as the rest. Not to mention that some other statements throughout the book may make some wonder what foundation the subject rests on. References to "theories that we hold dear" and chapter six's statement that "many of us don't want our metaphysics to be so dependent on one's point of view. We like to feel that we are dealing with objective, eternal and immutable truths, unaffected by our human perspective on things." What is this "dear" and what are these "wants" and "immutable truths?" These statements raise other intriguing questions, but a book of this length can only skim the surface of such larger background issues.

This tiny book stands as one of the best general introductions on this topic currently available. Anyone can follow its logic, examples and language. It also succeeds in evoking the scintillating mysteries inherent in many metaphysical questions. Many introductions drag the reader through a morass of arguments, counter-arguments and counter-counter-arguments. Professional philosophers need to wade in such waters, of course, but this intimidating method may estrange newcomers to the field. This book allows comprehension of the major issues without drowning itself in arguments, though many do appear. For some, this book may encompass all they ever need to know about metaphysics. Others will get hooked and find themselves rummaging through larger tomes or more detailed introductions. And those already versed in the subject matter may simply find themselves in the presence of a good read. And that's as conclusive a statement as anyone can make about this great introduction. Embrace bewilderment!

31 of 32 people found the following review helpful.

A truly great book

By Jon Jacobs

There are two books that have done more to help me understand the important, but difficult, ideas in philosophy than any other book and Mumford's VSI is one. The other, for those interested, is Bertrand Russell's "Problems of Philosophy".

'Metaphysics' is a very fine book on many levels. It's easy and fun to read. (In the context of it being a philosophy book of course.) It makes extremely difficult ideas seem simple.

For many just understanding what metaphysics is requires a fair amount of study and Mumford's book will teach you what metaphysics is and get you to understand some of the more important metaphysical problems.

I've read the book twice and plan to read it more. The second time I read it was on vacation at the ocean. Getting up at sunrise, getting a good cup of coffee, and reading 'Metaphysics' on the beach is something that everyone should do at least once.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

The clarity of Mumford's book speaks volumes

By Susanne C

Metaphysics A Very Short Introduction by Stephen Mumford is a brilliantly written introductory text that was considerably easier to digest than was the very short introduction to Philosophy of Science.

Contrary to my initial view that metaphysics dealt exclusively with the supernatural, the book subject matter, to my surprise, entertained many concrete as well as some supernatural explanations of phenomenon. Covering a wide range of topics from attempting to explain what is time to attempting to explain what is a person, the book made no definitive assertions, but offered many possibilities, complete with their inconsistencies, strengths, and weaknesses.

In my opinion, some of the most riveting questions the book answers include: (1) Are wholes just sums of parts (which is a topic that is deeply engaged in Buddhist circles), (2) What is a cause? (3) What is a person (and how does the definition apply to animals versus humans?) (4) How does time pass? (is it like a line that goes infinitely in either direction, a circle, etc.), and (5), the ultimate topic, in my opinion, What is possible?

I very much enjoyed the discussion on what is an absence, especially when it became evident that sometimes causation is based on absences, such as the absence of water in the case of a dying plant.

Similarly, the discussion on what counts as a person offered some profound subtopics, including Descartes

view that the mind continues beyond the death of the person and Wittgenstein's view that memory aligns us with the person we were in the past, where each point of having the past memory is like a strand in a rope, connecting the multitude of past/present memory periods (some of which are present in certain related periods, absent or forgotten in others) into one continuous rope. Although my explanation is a bit convoluted here, you can be assured that Mumford's explanation is crystal clear—that is the beauty of his book, the sheer simplicity with which he presents such a complex, abstract, and theoretical topic.

The highlight of the book for me was the topic of what is possible. Here, Mumford introduces the theory of the plurality of worlds as fathomed by David Lewis. This controversial theory suggests that when we consider what is possible, the framework of seeing what is possible in another universe/world is not only helpful to the consideration, but foundational, as he suggests that these other worlds actually exist, culminating into as many other worlds as accounts for the sheer exhaustion of all possibilities. This is just one way to frame the topic of what is possible. Another is the idea of combinations and recombinations of all existing elements of the universe

As made obvious in the book, there are many shortcomings and strengths of each of the views (which, to illustrate, in the case of the combinations and recombinations point-of-view has extended to a breaking down of possibilities into logical versus natural possibilities to account for combinations that are not possible in the physical world, such as being able to jump to the moon).

To conclude the book, Mumford discusses what is metaphysics and why it has any value, especially when it has no immediate physical utility other than the pleasure of delving into the abstract.

Coincidentally, if I'm correct, it is the abstract philosophizing that serves as an underpinning of the domains of what counts as science, ethics, statistics, and so forth. For instance, how can we be comforted in the verity of our assumptions on statistical correlations and causation if we don't have a compatible foundation on what causation means in metaphysical terms. The author sums up the difference of science and metaphysics as two ends of a scale, in which science is the observable while metaphysics is the abstract and theoretical understanding of the world. The metaphysical assumptions can be rejected on the grounds of being counterintuitive or contradictory, reduced to absurdity, although even on these grounds, there exist ongoing debates.

Stephen Mumford's book was possibly the best introduction for anyone brand new to metaphysics or anyone newly introduced to Western philosophies that dabble in metaphysics (for example, Descartes or Kant). The clarity of Mumford's book speaks volumes and is highly recommended as the first go-to for learning either metaphysics or even philosophy in general.

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