HENRY OF GHENT’S PHILOSOPHY

A. METAPHYSICS
It is not surprising that we can refer to one and the same thing in multiple ways and under different descriptions. Consider the example of an artfully crafted kitchen knife. For the craftsman or the connoisseur of good craftsmanship it is simply a beautiful object; for the chef it is an extremely useful tool to prepare food; for the police investigator it is a harmful device and potential weapon; for the chemist it is a certain aggregation of molecules; and for other people a knife is still something else. These diverging descriptions are normally unproblematic because the contexts in which they appear are very different. However, one might wonder which of them provides us with the most appropriate account of what it is to be this knife.

Or consider a more medieval example: the different ways in which an individual human being can be conceived. For some this individual is an agent to whom different sorts of voluntary action can be ascribed, for others it is a composite of an intellective soul and a body, and for yet others it is a certain kind of substance. The first point of view is obviously that of moral philosophy. On the second account, the human being is described as a hylomorphic union of a material component (here, the body) and a formal one (the soul). Since form and matter are essential parts of objects that undergo change, we can consider this description as proper to the “physicist” or natural philosopher, who examines changeable things. Finally, the third description is proper to the metaphysician, who examines everything insofar as it is being and who inquires into the different kinds of being. If all three approaches are correct, we can expect somehow to get from one to another. And again, we might wonder which of them is more fundamental.

Prima facie, there seem to be good reasons for considering the “physical” perspective as the most fundamental. Leaving moral philosophy aside, one might concede that metaphysics has a broader focus, but it is apparently only through an examination of the physical world that we

---

1 It was in order to explain change that Aristotle (in *Physics I*) introduced hylo-morphism.