

Philosophy Vocabulary

A Priori: Latin for “prior to the thing,” this is an *epistemic* term where something is known *a priori* if it can be known “independently of experience” or “without empirical investigation of the external world.” One example might be “Anything that has a color is extended in space.” Here, you do not need to go have a look at everything with a color in order to know that this is true. Typically, analytic statements are thought to be *a priori*, although Kant held that metaphysics was synthetic a priori. (Antonym: *A Posteriori*)

A Posteriori: Latin for “posterior to the thing,” it is an *epistemic* term where something is known *a posteriori* if it can be known only by experience or by empirical investigation of the external world. Example: “Smoking causes Lung Cancer.” Statements known *a posteriori* are commonly believed to be synthetic. (Antonym: *A Priori*)

Actual: A *metaphysical* term, it denotes everything in our spatio-temporal order. Usually, ‘is actual’ is taken to be synonymous with ‘exists’, though in philosophy, ‘actual’ is sometimes used with a narrower meaning than ‘exists’. (E.g., David Lewis notoriously holds that every possible universe exists, though only ours is actual.) N.B., ‘not actual’ denotes mere *possibilia* and *impossibilia*.

Analytic: A *semantic* term, an analytic statement is “true by definition” or “true in virtue of meaning” or “true by linguistic convention, independently of how the world is.” Examples are ‘Bachelors are unmarried’ or ‘A triangle has three sides.’ If such statements are true merely because of their meaning (and independently of how the world turns out), then it seems like you could *know* that they are true *a priori*, provided that you understand the statement. Famously, Quine argued that there are no analytic statements, hence, no *a priori* knowledge. (Antonym: Synthetic)

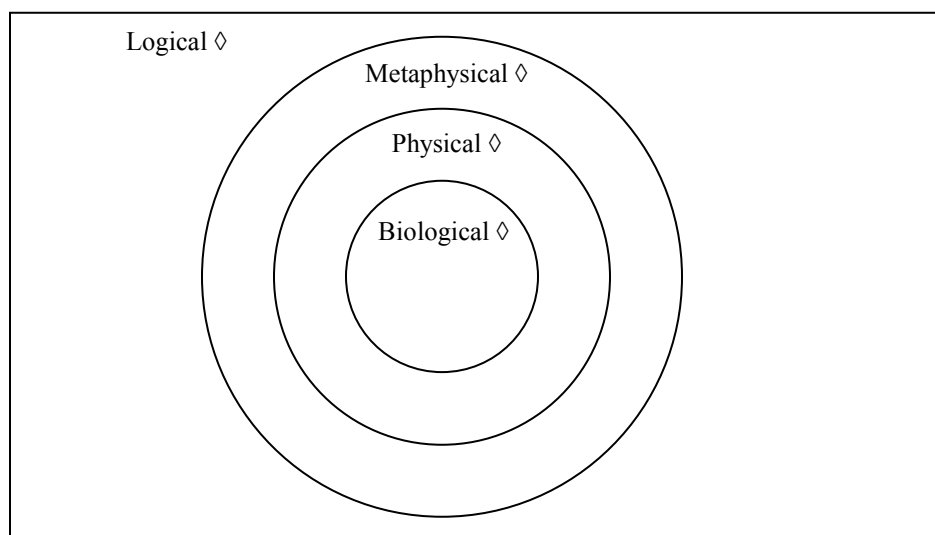
Contingent: This denotes actual states-of-affairs which do not necessarily obtain. (Since actuality is required, the term is thus not equivalent to ‘possible’). So for example, the fact that the Statue of Liberty is in NY is contingent. ‘Contingent’ is a *metaphysical* term, since it denotes states-of-affairs—yet we also say that a statement is contingent iff it represents a contingent state-of-affairs

Identity: In philosophy, identity is a *metaphysical relation* between some *x* and *y*. It is NOT a kind of “entity,” as suggested by ‘My identity has changed over the years’ and by ‘Nietzsche had a complex identity’. Even so, the term ‘identity’ can be used to express two *different* relations: (1) *x* is *numerically* identical to *y* means that when you’re dealing with *x* and *y*, you’re only dealing with ONE thing. Hence, “is numerically identical to” means “is self-identical to,” and is the relation expressed by ‘=’. (2) *x* is *qualitatively* identical to *y* iff: $x \neq y$ yet *x* and *y* still have all the same *qualities* or features (or nearly enough). Examples: The true sentence ‘Superman is identical to Clark Kent’ concerns numerical identity, since it is only talking about ONE guy. Whereas, the sentence ‘My office is identical to Tristram’s office’ concerns qualitative identity, since I’m talking about two different offices which share the same qualities (or nearly enough).

‘Is’: Following Russell, the word ‘is’ can play at least three different semantic roles in English. First, ‘is’ can express (numerical) *identity*, as in ‘Superman is Clark Kent’, and it can also express *existence*, as in ‘There is a Santa Claus’ or ‘Santa Claus is’. Thirdly, there is the ‘is’ of *predication*, where it functions as a copula to connect predicates with their subject-term, as in ‘Water is wet’ or ‘Santa is jolly.’ (Naturally, all three functions can be performed by any conjugation of the verb ‘to be’; consider ‘I am who am’.)

Necessary: A *metaphysical* term, a state-of-affairs is necessary iff it is impossible for it to not obtain. We also say a statement is necessary iff the statement represents a necessary state-of-affairs. Like ‘possible’, however, ‘necessary’ can be used in relation to different kinds of possibilities. Thus we can talk of something as “logically necessary,” “metaphysically necessary,” “physically necessary,” “biologically necessary,” etc.

Possible: This is a *metaphysical* term used to denote states-of-affairs whose description is consistent. So for instance, the existence of a talking donkey is a possible state-of-affairs, but so is any actual or necessary state-of-affairs. By extension, we say a statement is possible iff it represents a possible state-of-affairs. ‘Possible’ also has an *epistemic* use, where something is possible iff, *for all we know*, it is actual. Thus consider Goldbach’s conjecture (any even number greater than 2 is the sum of two primes). Both it and its denial are *epistemically* possible, since neither have been proven, but only one is *logically* possible, since whichever is false is necessarily false (on the usual view of mathematical truth). However, philosophers should highlight when ‘possible’ is used in the epistemic sense (if anything important depends on it). Crucially, the meaning of ‘possible’ is conditioned by context; sometimes we mean logical possibilities (whose descriptions are logically consistent); other times we might mean metaphysical possibilities (whose descriptions consistent with truths about the essences of things, e.g., ‘water is essentially H₂O’). Still other times, we might mean physical or biological possibilities (whose description is consistent with the truths about physics or biology, respectively). It is worth noting, moreover, that each set of possibilities mentioned is a subset of the possibilities that precede it. Here’s a picture:



One can circumscribe even smaller subsets of possibilities (psychological possibilities), or sets of possibilities that cut across these (epistemic possibilities).

Tokens vs. Types: A *token* is any individual or particular thing; its contrast is a *type* of thing. To illustrate, ask yourself: How many letters are in the word 'ABRACADABRA'? The question is ambiguous, since the word has 11 individual letters, i.e., letter *tokens*, but five *types* of letter are used, viz., the letter-types 'A', 'B', 'R', 'C', and 'D'. Notably, philosophers sometimes just speak of "tokens" when they mean tokens of *words* or of *concepts*. Yet the token/type distinction is used everywhere: We can speak of a token or type of immoral action, or distinguish between a token or type of substance, etc. N.B., numerical identity is broader than numerical identity between *tokens* (token identity), since a type *F* can be numerically identical to a type *G* (type identity)