

**A.W. Moore**

*The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things.*

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Moore states that his aim in this book is ‘to chart the evolution of metaphysics from the early modern period to the present’ (8). It must be said that he does a good job of this: his book is written on the basis of wide reading and can itself be read with benefit by readers with the most varied philosophical interests. He also states his hope that the book will contribute to continental philosophers being given a better hearing in quarters where they have previously been viewed with great suspicion. This hope is also to a great extent achieved. In particular, his account of Derrida’s objections to J.L. Austin’s work may be enlightening to those of a different tradition.

Moore takes a straightforwardly chronological approach to his subject up to and including Hegel. After this he tackles, firstly, ‘the analytic tradition’, with chapters on Frege, the early Wittgenstein, the later Wittgenstein, Carnap, Quine, Lewis and Dummett; and secondly, ‘non-analytic traditions’, with chapters on Nietzsche, Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger, Collingwood, Derrida and Deleuze.

Moore notes in his introduction that there are ‘three questions in particular, about what we can aspire to when we practice metaphysics, that have been significant foci of disagreement.

The Transcendence Question: Is there scope for our making sense of “transcendent” things, or are we limited to making sense of “immanent” things?

The Novelty Question: Is there scope for our making sense of things in a way that is radically new, or are we limited to making sense of things in broadly the same way as we already do?

The Creativity Question: Is there scope for our being creative in our sense-making, or are we limited to looking for the sense that things themselves already make?’ (9).

Moore argues that the first of these questions is ‘in effect, the question of whether metaphysics has its own peculiar subject, radically different in kind from the subject matter of any other enquiry’ (10).

Moore returns to these questions at periodic intervals throughout the book, making clear that in his view there is scope for making sense of ‘transcendent’ things, and in ways that are radically new and creative.

My main reservation about the book is not with its historical account of the evolution of metaphysics. Rather, it concerns the book’s very first sentence—‘Metaphysics is the most general attempt to make sense of things’ (1)—and the argument that this supports. Moore argues as follows:

- (1) ‘Metaphysics is the most general attempt to make sense of things’ (1).

- (2) 'Because of its generality, metaphysics is the one branch of philosophy that is not the philosophy of this or that specific area of human thought or experience. It is "pure" philosophy' (8).
- (3) It is 'a fundamentally creative exercise' (17).

Against Moore, I would argue that it is rather *philosophy* that is the most general attempt to make sense of things. Thus, alternatively, and in my view preferably, Moore might have argued as follows:

- (1) 'Pure' philosophy is the most general attempt to make sense of things.
- (2) Because of its generality, it is not concerned with this or that area of human thought or experience.
- (3) It is a fundamentally uncreative exercise.

In this argument I am equating 'pure' philosophy with Pyrrhonian scepticism. The Pyrrhonian sceptic's attempt to make sense of things is the most general in that it is the most self-reflective.

Although Moore too equates the most general attempt to make sense of things with the most self-reflective attempt, it is not clear where the Pyrrhonian sceptic would fit into his scheme: is the Pyrrhonian sceptic a philosopher or a metaphysician or something else? I would argue that the Pyrrhonian sceptic is, if nothing else, a philosopher. His philosophy is fundamentally uncreative but at the same time maximally self-reflective in that he never steps off the treadmill of an infinite regress, searching for a criterion of a criterion of a criterion *ad infinitum*. As a philosopher, then, the Pyrrhonian sceptic does not claim to have made any progress; *but* having no presuppositions of his own he is well-placed to discover the presuppositions of other areas of thought and inquiry. I am here arguing for a *descriptive* conception of metaphysics, akin to that offered by Collingwood and Oakeshott.

On this conception, then, philosophy, may be seen as a propaedeutic to descriptive metaphysical inquiry. A metaphysician without presuppositions of his own is not guaranteed to make more progress in discovering the presuppositions of other areas of thought and inquiry, but he is more likely to. Likewise the scientist or the historian who is unaware of his own presuppositions is not guaranteed to make progress in the pursuit of his own inquiries but, again, he is more likely to. In exploring these relationships we explore the relationships between metaphysics and other disciplines. However, these are relationships that Moore leaves unexamined. Nor does he attempt to explore the distinction between metaphysics and ethics, though it might be argued that ethics too is a general attempt to make sense of things.

Moore's work on metaphysics does not directly confront scepticism, even though it is the attempt to solve or circumvent the problem of scepticism that unites many of the various metaphysicians described in this book, at least those within the analytic tradition. (That is not to say that the recurrence of this problem has impeded progress in metaphysics, for, from the point of view of the descriptive metaphysician, it might be argued that as metaphysics has divorced itself from other disciplines it has also found interesting things to say about their methodologies.)

Moore is, however, enthusiastic in his praise of the novelty and creativity of *revisionary* metaphysical creativity. This is a theme that recurs among other places in the chapters on Bergson, Derrida and Deleuze. We are several times told that metaphysics is comparable to an artistic endeavor, but we are not told as to how metaphysics is different from art. We are left with the

unsatisfactory impression that for Moore metaphysics is indistinguishable from art–unsatisfactory not just because this view flouts our intuitions, but because it does so without any justification being offered.

Moreover, no fully satisfactory answer is offered to the first of Moore’s questions. Admittedly, he offers convincing and significant arguments against amalgamating metaphysics with science, but such arguments establish what metaphysics is not, not what it is.

To repeat, as a history Moore’s book is admirable, but readers who do not share Moore’s enthusiasm for revisionary metaphysics are unlikely to be won over by his arguments, even though they might to some extent give continental philosophy a more sympathetic hearing than previously.

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