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978-0-521-85111-4 - The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things

A. W. Moore

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Introduction

1. The Definition of Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the most general attempt to make sense of things. This is my working definition, but I want to make clear from the outset how little, in certain critical respects, I claim on behalf of it. An ideal definition, one might think, would be at once crisp, substantive, and uncontroversial, as well as correct. In fact, of these, I claim only that my definition is crisp. I do not even say that it is ‘correct’; not if that means that it is answerable to something other than my own purposes in writing this book. And to have tried to attain substance without controversy would have been foolhardy, because the nature of metaphysics is itself a fiercely contested philosophical issue – indeed, as I see it, a fiercely contested metaphysical issue.

What I aim to do with this definition, first and foremost, is to indicate what my theme is. At the same time I aim to establish early connections between concepts that will be crucial to my project, connections that are intended to elucidate the *definiens* as well as the *definiendum*, though they also commit me on certain matters of dispute as I shall try to explain in the course of this Introduction. I hope that my definition is broadly in accord with standard uses of the word ‘metaphysics’, at least insofar as these are broadly in accord with one another, and I hope that I am singling out something worthy of the attention that I shall be devoting to it in this book. But if I am wrong in the former hope, then I am prepared to defer to the latter and accept that my definition is revisionary; while if I am wrong in the latter hope, then the fault lies with the book, not with the definition.

How exactly, then, does this definition serve my purposes? What does it provide that is not provided by other pithy definitions of metaphysics that I might have appropriated, say

- the attempt ‘to give a general description of the whole of the Universe’
- the attempt ‘to describe the most general structural features of reality ... [by] pure reflection’
- the attempt ‘to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term’

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- ‘a search for the most plausible theory of the whole universe, as it is considered in the light of total science’
- ‘the science of things set and held in thoughts ... [that are] able to express the essential reality of things’

or even

- ‘the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct’?¹

All three of the expressions ‘most general’, ‘attempt’, and ‘make sense of things’ do important work for me. This is as much for what they do not suggest as for what they do. I shall expand on each in turn. I shall also comment on some significant structural features of my definition.

2. ‘The Most General ...’

‘Most general’, or some equivalent, is the expression that is most likely to be shared by any rival definition to mine. I have two observations about its occurrence in my definition that primarily concern what sort of generality is intended, two that are more structural.

The first observation concerning what sort of generality is intended is the obvious one. The generality of metaphysics is in large part the generality of the concepts that it trades in, concepts that subsume a wide range of other concepts and whose application is prevalent, however implicitly, in all our thinking. An unobvious way to appreciate this obvious point is to look at the main section headings of the first part of Roget’s *Thesaurus*.² They are ‘Existence’, ‘Relation’, ‘Quantity’, ‘Order’, ‘Number’, ‘Time’, ‘Change’, and ‘Causation’. That is almost a syllabus for a standard course in metaphysics.

The second observation concerning what sort of generality is intended, though less obvious, is no less important. Many people take metaphysics to be concerned with what is necessary rather than contingent, typically because they take it to be an *a priori* enterprise and they think that the *a priori* is concerned with what is necessary rather than contingent. Others are unsympathetic to the idea that there is any such necessary/contingent distinction, although this lack of sympathy does not translate into a lack of sympathy for the practice of metaphysics itself. I do not want to beg any questions in this particular dispute. ‘Most general’ suits both parties, in the

¹ These are taken, respectively, from: Moore (1953), p. 1, emphasis removed; Dummett (1992), p. 133; Sellars (1963), p. 1; Smart (1984), p. 138; Hegel (1975a), §24, p. 36, emphasis removed; and Bradley (1930), p. 10. But note that G.E. Moore is giving an account of ‘the first and most important part of philosophy’ rather than defining metaphysics, while Wilfrid Sellars, similarly, is defining philosophy rather than metaphysics. On the relation between philosophy and metaphysics, see §6 in this chapter.

² This part, or ‘class’ as it is called, is entitled ‘Abstract Relations’.

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one case because it can be interpreted as extending to all possibilities, not just those that happen to obtain, and in the other case because it need not be interpreted in terms of possibilities at all.³

The first of my more structural observations concerns the fact that ‘most general’ in my definition qualifies ‘attempt’. To some ears this will sound strange. ‘Most general’ will sound better suited to qualify ‘sense’. Thus in the other definitions listed in §1 above, ‘most general’ and its cognates always applied, in the search for some suitable representation of how things are, either to the sought-after representation or to the object of that representation, never to the search itself.

I set no great store by my positioning of this expression. I might just as well have defined metaphysics as the attempt to make the most general sense of things, or indeed as the attempt to make sense of the most general things, provided that in all three cases it was understood to be an open question what ultimately conferred the generality. Whether there is generality in metaphysical dealings with things because of the nature of the dealings or because of the nature of the things, or because of both, or perhaps because of neither, is another matter of dispute about which I do not want to beg any questions. Using ‘most general’ to qualify ‘attempt’ strikes me as the best way of registering my neutrality, however clumsy it may be in other respects.

The second of my more structural observations concerns the fact that ‘most general’ is a superlative. In this context it selects from among all possible attempts to make sense of things whatever is at the highest level of generality. So one immediate consequence of my definition is that *there is no denying the possibility of metaphysics*. (This admittedly presupposes that there is a highest level of generality.⁴ But it would not make much difference if the presupposition were rescinded. The definition could be amended in such a way that a pursuit’s being a metaphysical pursuit admits of degree: the more general, the more metaphysical. Still there would be no denying the possibility of metaphysics, at least to some degree.) There is room for dispute about whether metaphysics can be pursued in this or that way, or to this or that effect, or in contradistinction to this or that other discipline, but not about whether it can be pursued at all.

That is one controversy on which it suits me to take a stance from the very beginning. Why do I call it a controversy? Because countless philosophers have understood metaphysics in such a way that they have felt able to deny that there can be any such thing; we shall see many examples in what follows. Others, it should be noted, have gone to the other extreme of

³ It even suits those who accept the necessary/contingent distinction but who think that metaphysics is fundamentally concerned with what is contingent: see e.g. Papineau (2009). ‘Most general’ *can* be interpreted as extending to all possibilities. It need not.

⁴ It also of course presupposes the possibility of attempting to make sense of things. On this, see the next section.

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insisting that metaphysics is unavoidable. This view is less of an affront than it sounds. It allows for the possibility, if it does not entail it, that the guise in which metaphysics normally appears is one that would not normally count as metaphysical, say the basic exercise of common sense. As Hegel puts it, ‘metaphysics is nothing but the range of universal thought-determinations, and as it were the diamond net into which we bring everything to make it intelligible’ (Hegel (1970), §246, ‘Addition’, p. 202); or again, as C.S. Peirce puts it, ‘everyone must have conceptions of things in general’ (Peirce (1931–1958), Vol. I, p. 229). (This is part of the reason why both Hegel and Peirce, in the same contexts, urge us to be reflective in our metaphysics, lest it has control of us rather than we of it.) But whether or not metaphysics is unavoidable, I want to commit myself from the outset to its being at least possible. For reasons that I hope will emerge, that seems to me the best way of construing much of what those philosophers who have denied the possibility of ‘metaphysics’ have themselves been engaged in.

3. ‘... Attempt ...’

I now turn to the word ‘attempt’. One significant feature of this word is that it would be less likely to play the same role in the definition of a non-philosophical discipline. True, we might define bioecology as the attempt to understand the interrelationship between living organisms and their environment. But it would be at least as natural to define it as the *science* or *study* of the interrelationship between living organisms and their environment. Is there any reason not to adopt something analogous in the case of metaphysics?

There is. An immediate analogue would be to define metaphysics as the most general science of things, or the most general study of things, and there are many who would subscribe to just such a definition. But I want to leave open the possibility that metaphysics is not appropriately regarded as a *science* at all. Indeed I want to leave open the possibility that metaphysics is not appropriately regarded as a *study* of anything either, not even a study of ‘things’ in whatever liberal sense that already liberal word is taken. (One of the virtues of the expression ‘make sense of things’, to anticipate some of what I shall say in the next section, is that it can be heard as enjoying a kind of indissolubility that accords with this.)

A second point in connection with the occurrence of the word ‘attempt’ is that it further ensures the possibility of metaphysics on my definition. Or rather, it insures that possibility – against the impossibility of making sense of things. For, as centuries of attempts to trisect an angle with ruler and compass testify, it is possible to attempt even what is not itself possible.⁵

⁵ This is less straightforward than I am suggesting; but the main point survives. For discussion of some of the complications, with specific reference to Wittgenstein, see Floyd (2000).

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A third and final point. The phrase ‘make sense of’ may admit of a ‘non-success’ interpretation whereby it already signifies (mere) endeavour, as in the sentence, ‘I spent the entire afternoon making sense of this passage, but in the end I gave up.’ I am not sure how natural such an interpretation is. But at any rate I want to exclude it. That is one thing that the word ‘attempt’ enables me to do. By explicitly referring to endeavour in my definition, I indicate that ‘make sense of’ is not itself intended to do that work. But this is the only constraint that I want to impose on the interpretation of either ‘make sense of’ or its concatenation with ‘things’, as we shall now see.

4. ‘... to Make Sense of Things’

I turn finally to the expression ‘make sense of things’. This is an expression with myriad resonances. They will not all be prominent in the course of this book, but I do want them all to be audible throughout.

The ‘sense’ in question may be the meaning of something, the purpose of something, or the explanation for something. This is connected to the fact that a near-synonym for ‘make sense of’ is ‘understand’ and the range of things that someone might naturally be said to understand (or not) is both vast and very varied. It includes languages, words, phrases, innuendos, theories, proofs, books, people, fashions, patterns of behaviour, suffering, the relativity of simultaneity, and many more. Thus making sense of things can embrace on the one hand finding something that is worth living for, perhaps even finding the meaning of life, and on the other hand discovering how things work, for instance by ascertaining relevant laws of nature. I do not want to draw a veil over *any* of these. The generality of metaphysics will no doubt prevent it from embracing some of them, but that is another matter.⁶

When ‘make sense’ is used intransitively, there is a further range of associations. It is then equivalent not to ‘understand’ but to ‘be intelligible’, ‘admit of understanding’, perhaps even ‘be rational’. I mentioned parenthetically in the previous section that ‘make sense of things’ can be heard as enjoying a kind of indissolubility. What I had in mind was the way in which the sheer non-specificity of ‘things’ can put us in mind of simply making sense. As I shall urge shortly, this point must not be exaggerated. ‘Make sense of things’ does have its own articulation and we must not lose sight of this fact. Nevertheless, I want the many associations of simply making sense, like the many associations of making sense *of*, to inform all that follows.⁷

⁶ I shall return to this matter at the very end of the enquiry, in the Conclusion, §5.

⁷ There is in any case the point that, when someone makes sense of things in a certain way, and thinks and acts accordingly, then others who make sense of things in that same way can make sense in particular of him or her: see further Moore (2003a), p. 124. (The whole of that book is, in a way, a meditation on what is involved in making sense of things. My previous book, Moore (1997a), is likewise deeply concerned with this theme (see e.g. Ch. 10, §1).)

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But the phrase ‘of things’ does make a difference. For one thing, it serves as a check on the temptation, which must surely be resisted, to pursue metaphysics as though it were a form of pure mathematics, to be executed by devising abstract self-contained systems. The phrase may also, despite the non-specificity of ‘things’, serve to distinguish metaphysics from logic, and from the philosophy of logic, which are arguably concerned with making sense of *sense*. (This is not to deny the relevance of the latter to the former. There will be ample opportunity to witness such relevance in the course of this book.) One other function that ‘of things’ serves is to reinforce some of the resonances of ‘make’. For where simply making sense is a matter of being intelligible, making sense *of* something is a matter of rendering intelligible, with all the associations of productivity that that has. Indeed I want to leave room for the thought, however bizarre it may initially appear, that sense is literally made of things, as bread is made of water, flour, and yeast.

In general, it should be clear that my use of the expression ‘make sense of things’ is intended to take full advantage of its enormous semantic and syntactic latitude. I want my conception of metaphysics not only to cover as much as possible of what self-styled metaphysicians have been up to, but also to cover a range of practices which seem to me to be profitably classified in the same way even though the practitioners themselves have not conceived what they were doing in these terms.⁸ Thus, to take the most notable example, I believe that much of what Aristotle was engaged in, in his *Metaphysics*, would count as metaphysics by my definition (see e.g. the first two chapters of Book Γ). It is worth noting in this connection that the opening sentence of *Metaphysics* is ‘All men by nature strive to know,’ where the Greek verb translated as ‘to know’ is ‘*eidenai*’, about which Aristotle elsewhere says that men do not think they do that to something until they have grasped the ‘why’ of it (*Physics*, Bk II, Ch. 3, 194b 17–19). It would surely not be a strain to construe Aristotle as claiming that all men by nature strive to make sense of things.⁹

Among the many important possibilities left open by the latitude of the expression ‘make sense of things’ are

- that what issues from a successful pursuit of metaphysics is not knowledge, or, if it is knowledge, it is not knowledge that anything is the case,

⁸ A word, incidentally, about the beginning of this sentence. Here we see the first explicit reference in this book to a ‘conception’ of metaphysics. That makes this an apt point at which to comment on my use of the two terms ‘concept’ and ‘conception’, each of which will pervade the book. While I do not profess to have a rigorously defined distinction in mind, my intention is roughly to follow John Rawls’ usage in Rawls (1971) (see in particular p. 5). On this usage, various relatively determinate ‘conceptions’ of a thing, such as justice or metaphysics, can all be said to correspond to the same relatively indeterminate ‘concept’ of that thing.

⁹ Cf. Burnyeat (1981); and Lear (1988), Ch. 1.

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but rather knowledge *how* to reckon with things, or knowledge *what* it is for things to be the way they are, or something of that sort¹⁰

- hence that what issues from a successful pursuit of metaphysics is not knowledge which can be expressed by descriptive declarative sentences¹¹
- relatedly, that metaphysics is not a search for the truth, still less for the Truth, whatever honour the capitalization might confer
- that the best metaphysics involves creating new concepts

and

- that, on the contrary, the best metaphysics involves being clear about extant concepts and about what it is to make correct judgments with them.

I shall have more to say about some of these possibilities in §6 below (and about all of them in the rest of the book).

Among the many pitfalls that the expression ‘make sense of things’ signals for the practising metaphysician, there are two that are worthy of special mention. First, trying to make sense of things, or even for that matter successfully making sense of things, can be an unprofitable and even destructive exercise, especially when it involves the analysis of what is already, at some level, understood; jokes, metaphors, and some works of art are particularly vulnerable to this kind of spoiling. As Bas van Fraassen laments, ‘metaphysicians interpret what we initially understand into something hardly anyone understands’ (van Fraassen (2002), p. 3). The second pitfall is that it simply may not be possible to make (some kinds of) sense of things. We must take very seriously Adorno’s question of what the prospects are for metaphysics after Auschwitz.¹²

5. Metaphysics and Self-Conscious Reflection

Many people would say that metaphysics involves a significant element of self-conscious reflection. Ought I to have included some reference to this in my definition?

‘Most general’ already accounts for it. Or so I claim. To make sense of things at the highest level of generality, I would contend, is to make sense of things in terms of *what it is to make sense of things*; it is to be guided by the sheer nature of the enterprise. To attempt to do that is therefore necessarily to reflect on one’s own activity, and to try to make sense, in particular, of the sense that one makes of things.

¹⁰ I am presupposing that not all knowledge is knowledge that something is the case; for dissent, see Stanley and Williamson (2001).

¹¹ Cf. Moore (1997a), Ch. 8.

¹² See Adorno (1973), esp. Pt 3, §III.

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If I am right about this, it helps to explain why so much great metaphysics, perhaps all great metaphysics, has included some story about what metaphysics is. By the same token it ensures that, insofar as what follows is a kind of history of meta-metaphysics (as I put it in the Preface), it is at the same time a significant part of the history, simply, of metaphysics.

But even if I am wrong – even if it is not true that whatever satisfies my definition must involve a significant element of self-conscious reflection – the fact is that it *has* done so. There will be examples of this throughout what follows, especially when we come to the various traditions in the late modern period (that is, roughly, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) where much of the attention is focused on sense itself. But perhaps the most notable example, once again, is supplied by Aristotle, who, in the third chapter of Book Γ of *Metaphysics*, identifies as the most certain principle of reality that nothing can both be and not be, and who does so on the grounds that no making sense of things can include believing something both to be and not to be.¹³

There is however a further pitfall which such self-consciousness creates and which I should mention in this connection. Self-consciousness and self-confidence make notoriously bad bedfellows. It is hard, when we reflect on the sense that we make of things, not to be afflicted by all sorts of doubts about it, as will be evidenced from the very beginning of the historical narrative that I am about to tell.¹⁴ This means that, to whatever extent making sense of things needs a measure of self-confidence, there is a further danger that metaphysics will turn out to be a forlorn endeavour: it will turn out to be an attempt to do something that is subverted by the very methods used in the attempt. And of course, any self-conscious attempt to rectify the problem, like an insomniac's self-conscious attempt to fall asleep, will only make matters worse.

6. Three Questions

My aim in this book is to chart the evolution of metaphysics from the early modern period to the present. 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. That makes its evolution peculiarly difficult to separate from the evolution of philosophy as a whole. One way in which I hope to keep the project manageable is by concentrating more on how metaphysics has been viewed during that time

¹³ For an interpretation of Aristotle whereby his work serves as an even more striking example, see Lear (1988), Ch. 6, *passim*, but esp. §3.

¹⁴ For some fascinating insights into the relations between self-consciousness and self-confidence, specifically in relation to ethics, but with relevance to metaphysics too, see Williams (2006o), Chs 8 and 9.

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than on how it has been practised, although, for reasons given in the previous section, the two are not cleanly separated.

The story of how metaphysics has been viewed is a story of disagreements about its scope and limits. There are three questions in particular, about what we can aspire to when we practise 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?¹⁵

(a) *The Transcendence Question*

The Transcendence Question in turn raises all manner of further questions. It suggests various contrasts between our making sense of what is ‘beyond’ and our making sense of what is ‘within’. But beyond and within what? Who, for that matter, are ‘we’?¹⁶ While it is certainly true that there has been fundamental disagreement about whether our sense-making can take us over this boundary, the divisions between competing conceptions of what the boundary itself comes to may have been even more fundamental. It has variously been viewed as a boundary between:

- what is inaccessible (to us) through experience and what is accessible (to us) through experience
- what is unknowable (by us) and what is knowable (by us)
- what is supernatural and what is natural
- what is atemporal and what is temporal
- what is abstract and what is concrete
- what is infinite and what is finite

¹⁵ There is a muffled echo in these three questions of a tripartite classification that Kant imposes on his philosophical predecessors in the final section of Kant (1998). He classifies them: first, with regard to what they take their subject matter to be (objects of the senses or objects of the understanding); second, with regard to what they take the source of their knowledge to be (experience or pure reason); and third, with regard to what they take their methodology to be (an appeal to common sense or something more scientific and more systematic). It takes only a little strain to hear the echo of these in the Transcendence Question, the Creativity Question, and the Novelty Question, respectively.

¹⁶ This question will come to prominence in Ch. 10, §4, and again in Ch. 21, §7(c).

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- what bespeaks unity, totality, and/or identity and what bespeaks plurality, partiality, and/or difference¹⁷

and even, question-beggingly in the context of the Transcendence Question,

- what we cannot make sense of and what we can.

There is also an important strand in the history in which it has been taken for granted that, if there *is* scope for our making sense of transcendent things, then it is only by operating at the level of generality that is characteristic of metaphysics that we are able to do so, since it is only when we are dealing with the most general features of what is immanent that we are either obliged or indeed able to distinguish it from what is transcendent. The Transcendence Question is then, in effect, the question whether metaphysics has its own peculiar subject matter, radically different in kind from the subject matter of any other enquiry. This possibility also suggests a potential problem for those who think that we are limited to making sense of immanent things, a potential problem whose significance in the history of metaphysics would be hard to exaggerate: there may be no way of registering the thought that our sense-making is limited to what is immanent except by distinguishing what is immanent from what is transcendent, and thus either doing the very thing that is reckoned to be impossible, that is making sense of what is transcendent, or failing to make sense at all. We shall see plenty of manifestations of this aporia in what follows.¹⁸

(b) *The Novelty Question*

The Novelty Question calls to mind P.F. Strawson's famous distinction between 'revisionary' metaphysics and 'descriptive' metaphysics, where 'descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our

¹⁷ There is a hint here of what may have been an equally important fourth question: is there scope for our making unified sense of everything, or are we limited to making separate sense of separate things? Cf. the Archilochean distinction between 'the hedgehog', who 'knows one big thing', and 'the fox', who 'knows many things', a distinction developed in Berlin (1978) and further exploited in Hacker (1996), Ch. 5, §1. (In the former Isaiah Berlin argues that Tolstoy was a fox by nature, but a hedgehog by conviction. In the latter P.M.S. Hacker argues that Wittgenstein, by contrast, 'was by nature a hedgehog, but ... transformed himself ... into a paradigmatic fox' (ibid., p. 98). (Hacker is talking about the transition from Wittgenstein's early work to his later work: see Chs 9 and 10, esp. §2 of the latter, in this book.) Another thinker in whom we find a similar contrast between temperament and practice is David Lewis: in Ch. 13, §2, I shall cite a passage which shows him to have been a reluctant hedgehog.)

¹⁸ The first clear manifestation of it will occur in Ch. 5, §8, when I introduce what I there call the Limit Argument.