

THE EVOLUTION  
OF MODERN  
PHILOSOPHY

The Evolution  
of Modern  
Metaphysics:  
Making Sense  
of Things

A. W. Moore

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## The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics

### Making Sense of Things

This book is concerned with the history of metaphysics since Descartes. Taking as its definition of metaphysics ‘the most general attempt to make sense of things’, it charts the evolution of this enterprise through various competing conceptions of its possibility, scope, and limits. The book is divided into three parts, dealing respectively with the early modern period, the late modern period in the analytic tradition, and the late modern period in various non-analytic traditions. In its unusually wide range, A. W. Moore’s study refutes the still prevalent cliché that there is some unbridgeable gulf between analytic philosophy and philosophy of other kinds. It also advances its own distinctive and compelling conception of what metaphysics is and why it matters. Moore explores how metaphysics can help us to cope with continually changing demands on our humanity by making sense of things in ways that are radically new.

A. W. Moore is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oxford and Tutorial Fellow of St Hugh’s College, Oxford. He is the author of three previous books: *The Infinite* (1990); *Points of View* (1997); and *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty: Themes and Variations in Kant’s Moral and Religious Philosophy* (2003). He is also the editor or co-editor of several anthologies, and his articles and reviews have appeared in numerous other scholarly publications.



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# The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics

Making Sense of Things

A. W. MOORE  
*University of Oxford*



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*In memory of Bernard Williams*  
(1929–2003)

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‘William! you’ve been playing that dreadful game again,’ said Mrs Brown despairingly.

William, his suit covered with dust, his tie under one ear, his face begrimed and his knees cut, looked at her in righteous indignation.

‘I haven’t. I haven’t done anything what you said I’d not to. It was “Lions an’ Tamers” what you said I’d not to play. Well, I’ve not played “Lions an’ Tamers”, not since you said I’d not to. I wouldn’t *do* it – not if thousands of people asked me to, not when you said I’d not to. I –’

Mrs Brown interrupted him.

‘Well, what *have* you been playing at?’ she said wearily.

‘It was “Tigers an’ Tamers”,’ said William. ‘It’s a different game altogether. In “Lions an’ Tamers” half of you is lions an’ the other half tamers, and the tamers try to tame the lions an’ the lions try not to be tamed. That’s “Lions an’ Tamers”. It’s all there is to it. It’s quite a little game.’

‘What do you do in “Tigers and Tamers”?’ said Mrs Brown suspiciously.

‘Well –’

William considered deeply.

‘Well,’ he repeated lamely, ‘in “*Tigers* an’ Tamers” half of you is *tigers* – you see – and the other half –’

‘It’s exactly the same thing, William,’ said Mrs Brown with sudden spirit.

‘I don’t see how you can call it the same thing,’ said William doggedly. ‘You can’t call a *lion* a *tiger*, can you? It jus’ isn’t one. They’re in quite different cages in the Zoo. “*Tigers* an’ Tamers” can’t be ’zactly the same as “*Lions* an’ Tamers”.’

‘Well, then,’ said Mrs Brown firmly, ‘you’re never to play “Tigers and Tamers” either...’

(Richmal Crompton, *Just William*, pp. 134–135)

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## Preface

The story is familiar, even if it is not true. Some 250 years after the death of Aristotle, Andronicus of Rhodes produced the first complete edition of Aristotle's works. One volume, dealing with nature, was called *Physics*. Immediately after that Andronicus placed a volume of works which became known as '*ta meta ta physica*': the ones after the ones about physics. And so the corresponding discipline acquired its name.

Whether or not the story is true, the name is peculiarly apt. For '*meta*' can also be translated either as 'above' or as 'beyond', and metaphysics is often reckoned to lie at a level of generality above and beyond physics. Come to that, it is often reckoned to be a subject that should be studied 'after' physics.

Aristotle himself described what he was undertaking in that volume as 'first philosophy', or as the search for the first causes and the principles of things, or again as the science of being *qua* being (see, respectively: *Metaphysics*, Bk Γ, Ch. 2, 1004a 2–4; *Metaphysics*, Bk A, Ch. 1, 981b 28–29; and *Metaphysics*, Bk Γ, Ch. 1, 1003a 21). These descriptions variously indicate both the fundamental character of his undertaking and its abstractness. In its approach, the volume was a miscellany. It comprised historical and methodological reflections, a survey of problems and aporiai to be addressed, and a philosophical lexicon, as well as direct treatment of its main topics, which included substance, essence, form, matter, individuality, universality, actuality, potentiality, change, unity, identity, difference, number, and the prime eternal unmoved mover (God).

Plato had earlier dealt with many of the same topics, sometimes at the same high level of abstraction. But he had perhaps shown greater sensitivity than Aristotle towards the relevance of these topics to practical considerations about how one should live. At the same time he had shown less confidence in the power of theory, or even in the power of writing, to convey what needed to be conveyed about them (see e.g. *Phaedrus*, 257ff.). Plato's approach to philosophy was very contextual and open-ended. He wrote in dialogue form, allowing his protagonists, notably Socrates, to respond directly to one another's particular concerns. He also allowed them to probe

ideas, to toy with them, and to tease out their consequences. For Plato, philosophy was more of an activity than a science. That seems to me an extremely important model for our own understanding of metaphysics.

This book belongs to a series entitled *The Evolution of Modern Philosophy*. The brief of each contributor is to chart the evolution of some branch of philosophy from the beginning of the modern era to the present, my own assignment being metaphysics. To keep the project manageable I shall concentrate on the views of a select group of philosophers whose contribution to this evolutionary history seems to me especially significant. And I shall be more concerned with their views *about* metaphysics than with their views *within* metaphysics – at least insofar as this is a sharp distinction, and insofar as their views about metaphysics can be taken to include views of theirs, perhaps within metaphysics, that have important consequences about metaphysics, or even commitments of theirs, manifest in their practices, that have such consequences. What follows is therefore a kind of history of *meta*-metaphysics.

It is a remarkable history. In particular it contains remarkable cycles. Periods of recession within metaphysics in the glare of hostility from elsewhere in philosophy have alternated with periods of spectacular growth, and these have been marked by striking repetitions. But there has been progress too. ‘Evolution’ is an apt word. Metaphors of fitness, progeny, and mutation can all be applied in the description of how we have got to where we now are.

What follows belongs, in the useful contrast that Bernard Williams draws in one of his own prefaces, to the history of philosophy rather than the history of ideas (Williams (1978), p. 9). In other words it is in the first instance philosophy, not history. This is reflected in the fact that it is organized by reference neither to periods nor to *milieux* but to individual philosophers, all of whom are reasonably familiar from the canon. I shall do little to challenge the canon. And I shall do little to challenge a relatively orthodox interpretation of each of my protagonists. If I make any distinctive contribution in what follows, then I take it to be a matter of the connections and patterns that I discern and the narrative I tell.

Two points are worth making in connection with this. First, in telling that narrative, I have tried to follow what I take to be a basic precept of the history of philosophy: always, when listening to what philosophers of the past are saying to us, to ask how we can appropriate it. This precept applies even when – perhaps especially when – we cannot hear what they are saying to us as a contribution to any contemporary debate. It signals one of the most important ways in which philosophy differs from science, whose history is always in the first instance history, not science. (I shall have more to say about this in the Conclusion.)

Second, in reflecting on the distinctive contribution that I may have made in what follows, I am very conscious of the fact that I am a philosophical

generalist. I do not know whether it will sound hubristic to say this or apologetic, but it is true. To an extent it should sound apologetic. There are very few of my protagonists on whom I would claim to be even a moderate expert. In fact there are only three – or four if the early Wittgenstein and the later Wittgenstein count as two. (I am not going to be any more specific than that lest I give a hostage to fortune!) I am therefore beholden throughout to others. And I owe an apology to all those whose expertise I may have propagated without acknowledgement, or mangled, or worst of all ignored.

Still, whatever apologies may be consonant with my claim to be a generalist, I make no apology for the fact itself. I lament the increased tendency to specialism in philosophy. It is bad enough that there is an increased tendency to specialism in academia, whereby philosophy itself is pursued without due regard to other disciplines. But the narrowness of focus that we see nowadays within philosophy poses a threat to its being pursued at all, in any meaningfully integrated way. We of course need specialists. But – and here I echo Bertrand Russell, in the preface to his *History of Western Philosophy* (Russell (1961), p. 7) – we also need those who are concerned to make sense of the many kinds of sense that the specialists make.

Ought I to apologize, if not for adding a non-specialist book to the market, at any rate for adding a book to the market? It is a real question. As Michael Dummett observes, in yet another preface, ‘Every learned book, every learned article, adds to the weight of things for others to read, and thereby reduces the chances of their reading other books or articles. Its publication is therefore not automatically justified by its having some merit: the merit must be great enough to outweigh the disservice done by its being published at all’ (Dummett (1991a), p. x). There is huge pressure on academics nowadays to publish, which means that there is a correspondingly huge number of publications. People often complain that the result is a plethora of very poor work. I think the situation is far worse than that. I think the result is a plethora of very good work – work from which there is a great deal to learn, work which cannot comfortably be ignored although there is no prospect of anyone’s attending to more than a tiny fraction of it, yet work which could have been distilled into a much smaller, uniformly better, and considerably more manageable bulk. I do therefore need to confront the question, as any author does, of what excuse I have for demanding my readers’ attention.

I hope that there is some excuse in the generalism to which I have already referred. Here I should like to single out one particular aspect of this, which I have not yet mentioned. There would, I think, be justification in the publication of this book if it made a significant contribution to overcoming the absurd divisions that still exist between – to use the customary but equally absurd labels – ‘analytic’ philosophy and ‘continental’ philosophy. I do not deny that there are important differences between these. Nor do I have

any scruples about the fact that I am myself an analytic philosopher. But I unequivocally distance myself from those of my colleagues who disdain all other traditions. The ‘continental’ philosophers whom I discuss in [Part Three](#) of this book are thinkers of great depth and power; they are knowledgeable about philosophy, science, politics, and the arts; their work is rigorous, imaginative, and creative; and it is often brutally honest. I despair of the arrogance that casts them in the role of charlatans. Perhaps, if I were asked to specify my greatest hope for this book, it would be that it should help to combat such narrow-mindedness. Or, if that seemed too vague a hope, then it would be that the book should help to introduce analytic philosophers to the work of one of the most exciting and extraordinary of these ‘continental’ philosophers: Gilles Deleuze.

I have many acknowledgements. First, I am deeply grateful to the Trustees of the Leverhulme Trust for awarding me a Major Research Fellowship for the academic years 2006–2009, during which I carried out the bulk of the work on this book. I am likewise grateful to the Principal and Fellows of St Hugh’s College Oxford, and to the Humanities Divisional Board of the University of Oxford, for granting me special leave of absence for the same period. I am further grateful to the Principal and Fellows of St Hugh’s, and to the Philosophy Faculty Board of the University of Oxford, for granting me additional leave of absence for the academic year 2009–2010, during which I finished writing the first draft of the book.

I am very grateful to Paul Guyer and Gary Hatfield for inviting me to write the book. Paul Guyer in particular has provided invaluable help and encouragement throughout the project, not least by supporting my application for a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship. For similar support I thank David Bell and Alan Montefiore. And I am grateful to Stephanie Sakson for her excellent copyediting and for her additional advice.

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The influence of Bernard Williams on my thinking will doubtless be apparent even from this Preface. I owe an enormous amount to him. This book is dedicated to his memory.

A.W. Moore

*Note on Unaccompanied References:* All unaccompanied references in this book to chapters or sections (e.g. Ch. 5, §8) or to notes (e.g. n. 44) are cross-references to material elsewhere in the book. Any other unaccompanied references (e.g. pp. 208–214) are explained in the notes to the chapter in which they occur.





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