

Moore's Conception of Metaphysics

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ABSTRACT. Moore characterizes metaphysics as “the most general attempt to make sense of things.” This is not offered as a piece of conceptual analysis, which we might challenge by putative counterexample, but rather as an inclusive organizing principle. Nevertheless, there are ways in which (I submit) the definition could be helpfully developed, to draw out distinctive (and distinctively valuable) aspects of philosophical, and more specifically metaphysical, inquiry, and I offer some suggestions here. The aspects addressed include the appearance of mind-independence in the subject matter of metaphysics, and the importance of critical inquiry. Two concerns are raised about Moore’s inclusion of non-propositional sense-making in his conception of metaphysics: how the notion of generality applies to non-propositional sense-making; and what success-condition in non-propositional sense-making would be the counterpart of truth in propositional sense-making. I end by considering whether, despite the inclusiveness of his characterization, Moore’s view of the real point of doing metaphysics involves commitment to realism about the self.

Adrian Moore’s *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics* opens with the admirably succinct characterization of metaphysics as “the most general attempt to make sense of things” (Moore 2012, 1). This is put forward, not as a description of what previous attempts at definition were trying (but failing) to get at, nor as a prescription, but as an organizing principle, in relation to which the figures discussed in

the pages that follow, disparate though they are, can be seen as engaged in a common pursuit. The definition has the advantage over certain others that it brings together philosophers who are often thought of as belonging to different (and, it might be thought, incommensurable) traditions. The largely instrumental purposes of the definition put it beyond certain kinds of criticism. Complaints of the “But that’s not what *I* mean by metaphysics!” type would simply be out of place. So in what follows I do not offer a critique of the definition, exactly, but instead raise questions and make suggestions as to how it might helpfully be elaborated, given that the intention is to capture a distinctive form of intellectual activity. This is intended as a constructive contribution to Moore’s project.

First, a brief resumé of what I take to be the salient features of the definition.

Beside its exclusivity, the definition does, as Moore points out, protect metaphysics so conceived from the charge that it is impossible. Generality comes in degrees, and either there will be a most general way of making sense of things, or one can achieve greater and greater generality in one’s sense-making. The limit of feasible abstraction may or may not be at the same level of abstraction as was attempted by certain metaphysicians in the past. It may turn out (though Moore clearly thinks it won’t) that the highest useful level of generality is that attained by the sciences. Certainly, the definition avoids traditional verificationist objections to metaphysics. There is nothing in the definition that implies that the appropriately general attempt to make sense of things, or the appropriately general sense, is one that is restricted to *a priori* knowledge. Nor does it imply that the proper objects of knowledge, or study, are independent of us and our conceptual schemes. Indeed, the result of doing metaphysics need not be knowledge at all, if this is thought of as propositional knowledge. Not all sense-making is propositional, to be articulated in declarative sentences which are in principle evaluable as true or false. A certain kind of way of doing metaphysics may result in a reorientation of one’s view of the world, rather than the acquisition of beliefs. Metaphysics, then, need not be narrowly conceived as the pursuit of truth, and for some of the figures that Moore is concerned with, it isn’t. Finally, there is no prescription concerning the proper objects of metaphysics: ‘things’ captures this neutrality, with no implication that metaphysics should only be concerned with concrete and abstract particulars and their properties and relations.

As to the scope and ambitions of metaphysics, Moore articulates three questions that have tended to divide metaphysicians (I here paraphrase). First, the *Transcendence Question*: can we in principle make sense of things that are transcendent in some way (that is, they are beyond, e.g., sense experience, the natural world, the concrete, etc.)? Second, the *Novelty Question*: are we constrained by our current conceptual scheme, or can metaphysics legitimately offer revisions to that scheme? Third, the *Creativity Question*: do we (or can we) discover the ‘right’ sense, the sense that reflects the real nature of things, or do we rather invent senses in such a way that disagreements do not imply error on either side? The definition of metaphysics itself does not presuppose any particular answer to these questions. It

is also, as we have seen, neutral with respect to a fourth question that has divided metaphysicians, and not obvious subsumable under one of the other three. We might call it the *Priority Question*: is metaphysics answerable to science, or science answerable to metaphysics, or neither? The naturalistic tradition in metaphysics sees metaphysics as the working out, at a more abstract level, of the deliverances of the natural sciences. In contrast, Jonathan Lowe suggests that the role of metaphysics is to delimit the scope of ‘possible’, a task prior to that of empirically determining which of the various possibilities is actual (Lowe 1998, 4–5). Moore’s definition of metaphysics makes room for both of these, but also for an approach to metaphysics which is orthogonal to that of the natural sciences.

A full discussion of Moore’s conception of metaphysics would engage with his favored approach to those questions, but here I will confine myself to the core definition, and its aim of inclusiveness. What follows are some questions I would like to raise concerning that definition:

- (1) Does the definition in fact characterize philosophy generally, rather than metaphysics in particular?

Attempting to make sense of things, at very high levels of abstraction, is what all philosophers do. When we say more about what the relevant ‘things’ might be, we specify different branches of philosophy: when the object is knowledge, the branch is epistemology; when moral value, ethics and/or metaethics; when art, aesthetics, and so on. (It might even cover other disciplines: when the object is God, the discipline is theology, we might say, unless a case can be made for taking systematic theology to be less abstract than philosophy of theism.) There is a limit to the neutrality of ‘things’, however, since logic and philosophical logic, suggests Moore, count not as making sense of *things* but rather making sense of *sense*. (On some views, of course, senses are to be reified, and so count as ‘things’ even in a more narrow sense of the word, but this need not undermine Moore’s distinction between logic and metaphysics, for reasons given below.)

If we wanted to count metaphysics as one among these branches, we might follow Aristotle’s lead in *Metaphysics* and define the object as ‘being’ (and, moreover, studying it *qua* being). But Moore does not want to characterize metaphysics as just one branch of philosophy among others. But nor, I think, does he want to say that one counts as doing metaphysics just by virtue of engaging in any of these branches of philosophy. His conception treats metaphysics as First Philosophy (to use another Aristotelian phrase, but not quite in Aristotle’s sense), as something foundational, perhaps prior to these other branches. You can ask “what should I do?” and so engage in normative ethics. But perhaps first you need to make some effort to reach a worldview in the context of which you can ask normative questions. So your gaze should, at least to begin with, be directed outward. You are, inevitably, exploring a conceptual scheme, but not *qua* conceptual scheme. Insofar as you are doing metaphysics, you are interested in what that scheme is about (even if it turns out that what it is about is not independent of the scheme

itself). To put it another way, there is a distinction between attending to the intrinsic properties of our representations (thoughts, words, pictures . . .) and attending to their content. Insofar as logic attempts to abstract from content, it attends to properties of representations. Epistemology (and part of philosophy of language) is concerned with the relation between representations and their content. But metaphysics is concerned with the content. This is true even of Strawson's project of 'descriptive metaphysics' (Strawson 1959, 9–10). The descriptive metaphysician is concerned with the content of our conceptual schemes, though it may turn out that the content only consists of purely intentional objects. But further, that content will present itself either as obviously dependent on us in some way (as perspectival, for example), or as independent of us. The object of a thought about anxiety, for instance, presents itself as dependent on us in a way in which a thought about a tree will not. I suggest that metaphysics (even quite broadly construed) is particularly concerned with those contents of our representations that present themselves to us as independent of those representations. So there is a debate about the metaphysics of *nowness* (is only what is present real?) precisely because the property of being *now* presents itself as independent of us. In contrast, there is no debate about the metaphysics of *hereness* because being *here* does not present itself as independent of us, but is plainly perspectival and is experienced as such.

Here, then, is one suggested supplement to Moore's definition: "metaphysics is the most general attempt to make sense of things insofar as those things are presented to us as independent of our representations." I am not sure how far Moore would approve of this addition. By focusing on things in this way, we don't, perhaps, make as much room as Moore would like us to make for the intransitive version: making sense, period.

(2) Does *any* (suitably general) attempt at making (suitably general) sense count as metaphysics?

That not all forms of sense-making deserve to be included within the definition of metaphysics can be illustrated by means of a character that we might dub 'the intellectual eclectic'. (Whether or not there are any tokens of the type does not affect the point here: I don't intend what follows to be a fair characterization of the group of ancient Greek philosophers known as the Eclectics.) The eclectic is well acquainted, in a rather unsystematic way, with a significant number of the writings of great philosophers, theologians, mystics, pneumatologists, astrologers . . . and has constructed from these writings a patchwork of abstract ideas, values, and doctrines that he finds particularly congenial. It is, in its way, an impressive scheme, if a somewhat grotesque one, and with it he finds he is able to make sense of the world around him, and it provides comfort in moments of darkness. Granted that it meets the generality condition, and is directed to things rather than to the representations of things, does it count as metaphysics? No: his attempt to make sense is genuine enough, but it is entirely uncritical. He is quite unconcerned, for example,

with its coherence or well-groundedness. Some ideas that he has encountered he likes, and adopts; others that he does not like, he rejects. No test other than that of congeniality is applied to these ideas. And whether some are in tension with others is not something that he cares to consider, or do anything about if such tensions come to his attention.

It is plain, I think, that even if metaphysical ideas feature, even predominate, in his system, the activity he is engaged in when he is constructing and expanding it does not count as metaphysics. Another supplement to Moore's definition therefore suggests itself: "metaphysics is the most general *critical* attempt to make sense of things." But what is the content of 'critical'? This is not easy to answer without abandoning the neutrality of Moore's definition. Being critical certainly involves more than merely having *some* criterion of selection, for the intellectual eclectician has such a criterion ('is this congenial to me?'). But insisting on consistency as the criterion will exclude too much of what Moore wants to include: it is only applicable to the propositional. And even if we are happy restricting metaphysics to the propositional, there is a bona fide group of metaphysicians—dialetheists—who do not want our description to conform (always) to consistency, because (they say) *the world itself* is contradictory in certain respects (see, e.g., Priest 2006). So, while avoiding the subjectivity of the eclectician's criterion, while at the same time remaining as inclusive as possible, we might propose that the criterion of selection appeal to something other than purely personal concerns. What the appropriately objective, or perhaps intersubjective, criteria might be is touched on under questions (4) and (5) below.

(3) How do we discern different levels of generality when the sense in question is non-propositional?

As Moore notes above, the appropriately general sense that is the end of metaphysical attempts to make sense need not be propositional in form, and so not one reducible to various theories which are truth-apt. This is not peculiar to philosophy. In an essay responding to the radical theology movement in the 1980s, and in particular Don Cupitt's contribution to that movement, Rowan Williams suggested that talking of God is

... structurally more like talking about some 'grid' for the understanding of particular objects than talking about particular objects in themselves. (Williams 1984, 15)

One experiences and responds to things differently as a result of possessing this grid, but what informs those experiences and responses is not something articulable in terms of a set of doctrines or theses held true by the believer. To believe in God is not necessarily to be a theist. (And this example also raises the question of how much Moore's conception spills over traditional boundaries. Religion is a form of sense-making. It may be a non-propositional form of sense-making. It may also be a critical form of sense-making.)

Where the sense arrived at is propositional in form, we can define different levels of generality or abstraction: the more general proposition will rule out fewer possibilities than the less general proposition. That is, the more general proposition will rule out fewer possibilities *as actual* than will a more specific proposition. The obviously general, metaphysical proposition that ‘everything actual is necessary’ in one sense rules out a lot of possibilities: no non-actual state of affairs is even possible. But it says very little about what is actual. When, however, we talk about non-propositional sense, no obvious way of defining different levels of generality presents itself. This may not matter too much, since we can always appeal to Moore’s point that ‘general’ is a qualification that can attach to any of the various components of his definition: attempt, sense, and things. If it turns out that it is not appropriate to use it to qualify non-propositional sense, then we can take it to qualify ‘things’ instead. So the reorientation to the world that might be the result of non-propositional sense-making could be general in the sense of attending to the world as a whole, rather than to one particular aspect of it, like contemporary art. Still, it would be nice if we could define generality of sense in non-propositional terms. One approach would be to define it in terms of the specificity of concepts or language used to articulate that sense. The more specific the concepts (i.e., the smaller the range of things to which they apply), the less metaphysical.

But now a worry looms: insofar as any concept delimits sense, the most general sense will be one that cannot be articulated, since any attempt to do so involves a loss of generality. Consider Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. Siddhartha is the son of a Brahmin, training to be a Brahmin himself. But he is not satisfied by his father’s teachings, and determines to engage in an independent quest for understanding. The quest is not a theoretical one (in his encounter with the Buddha he makes it clear that understanding is not to be found through doctrines), but a practical one: the question is how to live one’s life so as to reach perfect understanding. For a while he lives the life of an ascetic, but fears that in his attempts to subdue the Self he is simply running away from it. He works for a merchant, largely as a means to be able to indulge in a life of sensual pleasure, but this kind of life too he finds wanting. Eventually, he goes to live with the ferryman, and spends much time contemplating the river. Gradually, he reaches a state of enlightenment:

When Siddhartha listened attentively to this river, to this song of a thousand voices; when he did not listen to the sorrow or laughter, when he did not bind his soul to any one particular voice and absorb it in his Self, but heard them all, the whole, the unity; then the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: Om—perfection. (Hesse 1922, 105)

He would, if questioned, say that he had ‘made sense of things’, understood in the broadest possible sense. But it can only be experienced: it cannot be said. This not altogether welcome result is reminiscent of (one half of) an entry in the *Philosophical Lexicon*: “wisdom: a state of understanding so complete and exhaustive . . . as to

be totally incommunicable” (Dennett and Steglich-Petersen 2008). Perhaps, as Wittgenstein remarks, there comes a point in philosophy where “one just wants to emit an inarticulate sound” (Wittgenstein 1953, §261), but presumably what comes out won’t count as a piece of metaphysics.

Again, we may have to use one of Moore’s let-out clauses. If it turns out that the most general sense is one we cannot articulate, we can retreat to one of the many lower levels of generality which can, unlike ‘wisdom’, be communicated.

(4) On this conception of metaphysics, what, if anything, plays the role that truth plays in more narrow conceptions of metaphysics?

If metaphysics is aiming at the truth, then the sense we make of things has to be propositional in form, for only then will it have truth-conditions. So what of *non*-propositional sense-making? We must have *some* criterion for success in mind: metaphysics cannot be an aimless activity. Does this need to be spelled out in the definition of metaphysics? I think it does. The intentional aspect of metaphysics is of course already captured by the words ‘attempt to make sense’: making sense is what we are deliberately aiming at. But what counts as having succeeded in arriving at an *appropriate* sense? If we think of metaphysics as aiming at the truth, then the relevant sense is one that provides us with true beliefs. Not all truth-apt ways of making sense will do this. One can, I think, say quite intelligibly that the alchemists made sense of the world, organized it into a coherent system which guided their own alchemical experimenting, while at the same time being completely mistaken. But when we turn to non-propositional sense-making, what defines the difference between appropriate and not appropriate? To be clear: success in sense-making is not to be a criterion for doing metaphysics: a failed metaphysical system is still a metaphysical system. But *aiming* at success must be a criterion. It is not enough to aim at the most general sense, either, for there may be a number of equally general ways of making sense (indeed, the variety of metaphysical systems even among those who share the ideal of truth proves this). So, once more, we need to supplement the definition: “Metaphysics is the most general critical attempt to make *appropriate* sense of things.” Two questions now arise: does this say enough, and does it say too much?

‘Appropriate’, like ‘critical’, looks rather empty until we say more about what defines the appropriate/non-appropriate boundary. As Moore points out, even if the only kind of sense-making we are engaged in is propositional, there are other ways of judging the success of a metaphysical conception of the world. We might count its tendency to promote happiness, for example, or to enable one to arrive at a set of values, or to allow us to transcend our everyday perspective. These ways of measuring the success of our sense-making are equally applicable to non-propositional sense-making.

But not everyone will agree that this conception of what is ‘appropriate’ sense-making should be built into our conception of it. What of metaphysics as a purely contemplative activity—that is, one which has no practical consequences, or none,

at any rate, that motivate the metaphysician's inquiry? Now, just as Moore's definition allows for a plurality of kinds of sense, it should, perhaps, allow for a plurality of conceptions of appropriate sense-making. Each should decide for themselves what 'appropriate' means in this context. As a way of reinforcing this point, consider my final question:

(5) Does metaphysics presuppose realism about the self?

In his conclusion, Moore writes:

I take myself to be largely in agreement with Deleuze, who reminds us that the principal dimensions of assessment for a metaphysical undertaking have to do with factors such as its interest, its relevance to other undertakings, and its capacity to stimulate and to empower. (Moore 2012, 600)

The success conditions, in short, are to be defined in terms of our needs. And the 'our' here isn't confined to practicing metaphysicians, but a much wider group. The idea, I take it, is that metaphysics is answerable to the requirements of human nature, not to the possibly eccentric demands of a fringe group. But then its success conditions, however broadly defined, must be articulated in terms of its 'consumers'. And for these conditions to be realized, there must actually *be* consumers. Not everyone finds the proposition that there are indeed such consumers, i.e. selves, unassailable. Hume famously failed to find the self amid the myriad phenomena of consciousness. The idea of the self is an embarrassing anomaly in Berkeley's system, in which ideas can only represent what they are like, and nothing is like an idea but an idea, for the self is not an idea, but the subject of ideas. In Buddhism, we encounter the 'No Self' doctrine, and so on.

The existence of a metaphysical system from which selves are banished is entirely consistent with the truth-ideal, the idea that success-conditions in metaphysics are to be defined in terms of truth, that metaphysics is answerable to reality and nothing else. The truth may be entirely indifferent to human concerns: no God, no goodness, no beauty, no unified and persisting beings outside the projections of mental representations. Making room for this intellectual tradition (truth the only legitimate goal, whether it be congenial or not), while not excluding the more anthropocentric criteria, we may have to propose a disjunctive articulation of success conditions. And this, like all disjunctive definitions, falls short of the Socratic ideal of discerning the essences of concepts. The worry will always remain that the disjunction is an arbitrary one.

But perhaps I am reading too much into Moore's sympathies with Deleuze. If (to address the Transcendence Question) we cannot make sense of things in a way that transcends appearances, then our criteria for appropriate sense-making should not attempt to transcend them either. It is enough that the existence of the self and its needs are among those appearances for our metaphysical goal to be answerable to them.

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