Adrian W. Moore: *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things.* (Series: The Evolution of Modern Philosophy). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012, ISBN 978-0-521-85111-4; £ 70.00, US $ 110.00 (Hardback); xxi + 668 pages

One of Dashiell Hammett's most famous detective stories is entitled *The Big Knockover*. Adrian W. Moore's new book would have deserved the title *The Big Sense Making*; he preferred to call it: *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*. In this 668 pages heavy tome, Moore undertakes to re-tell the history of modern metaphysics from René Descartes to Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. In the course of this "narrative", he employs and advertises his own conception of metaphysics according to which it would be "the most general attempt to make sense of things" (1).

A New Series. The book belongs to the new series *The Evolution of Modern Philosophy* by Cambridge University Press that seeks to answer the following questions: "Why has philosophy evolved in the way it has? How have its sub-disciplines developed, and what impact has this development exerted on the way that the subject is now practised?" Perhaps I am still taking such announcements too seriously, but when you come to think about it, any claim to provide complete and illuminating answers to these two questions would be utterly presumptuous. Moore, certainly, didn't answer these questions for the case of metaphysics; nobody did and nobody could. After all, what scientific disciplines and what masterminds are supposed to be in the position to explain why philosophy as a whole or some philosophical sub-discipline, e.g. metaphysics, has evolved exactly in the way it has? And, by the way, is the history of modern philosophy aptly described as an evolution at all?

A History of Metaphysics and Meta-Metaphysics. Interestingly, Moore is totally free from such qualms. The ambitious, to my mind: over-ambitious, aim of his book is "to chart the evolution of metaphysics from the early modern period to the present" (8). And, Moore definitely likes the analogy with biological evolution: "'Evolution' is an apt word. Metaphors of fitness, progeny, and mutation can all be applied in the description of how we got to where we now are" (xviii).

To keep his ambitious project manageable, Moore structures his story around a selection of individual thinkers. He has chosen twenty protagonists he distributes amongst three parts: *Part One, The Early Modern Period* (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Fichte, Hegel); *Part Two: The Late Modern Period: The Analytic Tradition* (Frege, early Wittgenstein, later Wittgenstein, Carnap, Quine, [David] Lewis, Dummett), and *Part Three, The Late Modern Period: The Non-Analytic Tradition* (Nietzsche, Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger, Collingwood, Derrida, Deleuze).

Historians of philosophy will find Moore's periodization somewhat extraordinary. Usually, early modern philosophy is taken to extend, roughly, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. While Kant may be a borderline case, Fichte and Hegel are certainly not classified as *early* modern thinkers. More importantly, many historians of modern metaphysics will miss some of their favorites. I, for one, missed John Locke, George Berkeley, Bernard Bolzano, Franz Brentano, Bertrand Russell, George Edward Moore, Nicolai Hartmann, Wilfrid Sellars, Peter F. Strawson and David Armstrong. And I missed the whole movement of inductive metaphysics which started soon after the breakdown of German Idealism and is showing signs of a comeback in our days. Still more importantly, while Moore compares the protagonists of the chapters with each other, he does little to contextualize the contributions of the individual thinkers. Almost all philosophers belong to schools or at least to circles; accordingly, they are best understood in the context of complex constellations and interrelationships. Thus, it is certainly not enough to compare Kant to Locke, Leibniz or Hume; Kant's revolution in metaphysics can hardly be understood without a familiarity with less well-known figures such as Christian Wolff, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, Johann Heinrich Lambert, Christian August Crusius and others. Even self-styled lone wolfs were heavily influenced by earlier and contemporary thinkers – Nietzsche, for example, by Heraclitus, Arthur Schopenhauer, Gustav Gerber and Charles Darwin. To take another example, Quine's attitude to metaphysics cannot be appreciated without a thorough knowledge of at least Bertrand Russell, the Vienna Circle and the Lvov-Warsaw School. A final example: It is no accident that David Lewis dedicated his *Papers in Metaphysics and*

Epistemology to "the philosophers, past and present, of Sydney and Canberra". Unfortunately, Moore ignores the highly influential Australian school of metaphysics and meta-metaphysics (C.B. Martin, Ullin T. Place, David Armstrong, J.J.C. Smart, David Chalmers).

Most importantly, the history of modern metaphysics cannot be understood without an intimate familiarity with its origins in antiquity and the ensuing disputes on the scientific status, objects and methods of this highly controversial discipline. Of course, Moore's task was a history of *modern metaphysics*; and this is already a considerable task. Nevertheless, he should have put in front of his material a short introductory chapter about what happened before. More specifically, there can be no serious history of metaphysics that does not start from the problems we find in Aristotle's vision of what he called "First Philosophy". Aristotle left posterity not only the idea of a new philosophical discipline, he also left a heavy burden. The bundle of writings that were later published under the title *Ta meta ta physica* was unashamedly work in progress. Aristotle tried out more than one conception of first philosophy; and he was well aware that the very possibility of such a discipline is a problem to be solved, not a fact to be presupposed. Among the projects contemplated by Aristotle are: (a) the science of first principles and causes, (b) the study of being *qua* being, (c) the study of being in general, (d) the investigation into what is (exists) in the primary way, i.e. the investigation into substance, and, finally, (e) the science of immovable substances or divinities. Even if we unite (b), (c) and (d) under the modern heading "ontology" (including the ontology of substance), there are still three *prima facie* non-equivalent conceptions of metaphysics left: (i) *metaphysics as fundamental science* dealing with the primary concepts and principles which are common to all sciences, (ii) *metaphysics as ontology* studying all the things which exist under the very aspect that they exist and (iii) *metaphysics as theology* investigating the divine substance. The question whether the subject matter of metaphysics is being *qua* being or God remained a major issue in medieval philosophy. Thus, whether metaphysics is possible at all, and, if yes, whether it is possible as a science, what its subject is and what methods it should use, these are all problems that accompany the history of philosophy from Aristotle to the present.

As Moore himself emphasizes in the *Preface*, he is more concerned with the views of his protagonists "*about* metaphysics than with their view *within* metaphysics" (xviii). He is aware that "the nature of metaphysics is itself a fiercely contested philosophical issue – indeed […] a fiercely contested metaphysical issue" (1). Accordingly, Moore's main interest is in meta-philosophy; more precisely, his book is self-consciously a contribution to the growing literature on meta-metaphysics, "a kind of history of *meta*-metaphysics" (xviii; cp. 8, 585). Since most metaphysical treatises are already highly abstract and dry reading matters, it should come as no surprise that Moore's meta-metaphysical *tour de force* proves even more abstract and often dry in the extreme.

Moore's Formula. This is not the place to discuss Moore's interpretations of his twenty protagonists in any detail. I will leave it to the Spinoza scholars to judge the chapter on Spinoza, the Fichte scholars to judge the chapter on Fichte, and so on. In his Preface, Moore announced: "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" (xviii). By and large, this is borne out in most interpretations in the book. I am less sure about the canon. No chapter on Locke, Berkeley or Malebranche, but two chapters on Wittgenstein and an extra-long chapter on Deleuze – "little to challenge the canon"? Come on!

Be that as it may, I will focus on Moore's meta-metaphysical ideas. According to Moore, metaphysics is "the most general attempt to make sense of things" (1). Quite obviously, he loves this formula like a teenager loves the Refrain of his favourite pop-song; he repeats it a thousand times, he varies it, plays with it and even iterates it. To give only one short example, here is Moore on Husserl: "[…] even when he is practising the rest of his phenomenology [i.e.: when is not in the business of defending his idealism], he is, at least some of the time, attempting to make maximally general sense of things. True, what he is principally doing, all of that time, is attempting to make sense of making sense of things. […] Indeed, we could say that precisely what is wrong with the excursion into idealism is that it is an attempt to make

maximally general sense of things that is not suitably informed by the attempt to make sense of making sense of things" (456). As I told you, Moore loves his formula; and, or so I predict, many a reader will come to hate it before he has reached the end of the book!

But, let us ask what does the formula convey? How is it to be understood? As Moore himself notes, "make sense of things", to begin with this part, is an expression "with myriad resonances" (5). Far from seeing a problem here, Moore wants "the many associations of simply making sense, like the many associations of making sense *of*, to inform all that follows" (5). To evaluate this proposal, remember again the pre-Moorean history of metaphysics. Aristotle and his many followers were concerned about too much "resonances" and "associations" for the simple reason that equivocations and obscurities in the basic concepts of metaphysics (e.g., being, identity, difference, principle, cause, change etc.) call in question whether there can be a serious scientific discipline of this kind at all. After all, there is no science of banks covering both the banks of rivers and lakes and the Bank of England. Aristotle even developed an ingenious account of "focal meaning" (G.E.L. Owen) or core-dependent homonymy (C. Shields) to overcome this very real difficulty. Moore, on the contrary, is quite happy "to take full advantage" of the "enormous semantic and syntactic latitude" of his favourite expression "making sense of things" (6). Most emphatically, he wants to allow for "all the associations of productivity" that talk of "making sense *of*" may have. Here is Moore: "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" (6). Bizarre, indeed! If Moore's book should eventually be translated into French, it might, accordingly, appear under the title *Boulangerie du Sens* that sounds even more stylish than Deleuze's famous *Logique du Sens*.

To be serious, "understanding" and "explanation" might have been more suitable leading concepts for a history of metaphysics and meta-metaphysics. What is badly needed in any case is an account of metaphysical explanations and metaphysical understanding: What kind of questions do metaphysical explanations address? Under what conditions are the explanations adequate answers? When is a metaphysical explanation a good explanation? Under what conditions do metaphysical explanations enhance our overall understanding? How are metaphysical explanations related to the explanations given by the fundamental and the special sciences? Moore does not offer such an account (at least, not in this book); nor does he offer a theory or, at least, an account of "making sense of things" – if this should be possible at all, given the many equivocations in this enigmatic formula.

The formulation "most general attempt" raises additional questions, especially questions of demarcation: Pre-philosophical myths, the world religions and the arts (especially literature), not to mention theoretical physics, are also in the sense-making business. Against this background, is it self-evident that metaphysics is "the most general attempt to make sense of things"? Are Aristotle's or Fichte's attempts at sense-making, for example, clearly more general than those of Homer and Hesiod? Or those of Jesus or Buddha? Or those of Shakespeare, Balzac or Woody Allen? (Not to mention Steven Weinberg.) And, last but not least, how about philosophy? Traditionally, metaphysics has been conceived as *one* part of philosophy (along with logic, epistemology, ethics etc.); should not philosophy, then, deserve the title "the most general attempt to make sense of things"? To be sure, Moore emphasizes the importance of "self-conscious reflection" (7f.) which, so he claims, is already included in "most general" (7). This might help with some critical cases; but does it help with all? It certainly does not help with distinguishing between metaphysics and philosophy.

Instead of developing a general account of making sense of things, Moore deploys diagnostic questions to guide his investigations (8ff.). According to Moore, there are "three questions in particular, about what we can aspire to when we practice metaphysics, that have been significant foci of disagreement" (9). These questions are the following: (i) The Transcendence Question: Can we make sense of 'transcendent' things? (ii) The Novelty Question: Can we make sense of things in new ways, even in radically new ways? (iii) The Creativity Question: Can we be creative in our sense-making? In a footnote, Moore adds a fourth question: "is there scope for our making unified sense of everything, or are we limited to making separate sense of separate things?" (10, n. 17). Moore's own view is that metaphysics is fundamentally and importantly a creative endeavour (15); according to him, we are free, literally, to *make* sense of things in

radically *new* ways (15). The most important way in which metaphysics is able to make a difference to us, is "by providing us with radically new concepts by which to live" (20, cp. 7). The paradigms of such potentially "action-guiding" concepts are what Bernard Williams, Moore's teacher and model, called "thick" ethical concepts (e.g. promise, infidelity). Again, I do not see why we should call these creative exercises contributions to "metaphysics" – and not contributions to, say, "ethics" or, quite generally, "philosophy".

One question that has been a significant focus of disagreement is completely missing on Moore's list. To my mind, it has even been the *Schicksalsfrage*, the fateful question, of metaphysics from Aristotle to the present: Is metaphysics possible as a science? To be sure, it is no accident that Moore does not put this question at the centre of his narrative. He decidedly wants "to leave open the possibility that metaphysics is not appropriately regarded as a *science* at all" (4). Moore does even go further: "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" (4). Adopting Bernard Williams' phrase, Moore likes to see metaphysics as "a humanistic discipline" (343). (But note that Williams applied the phrase to philosophy.) Time and again, Moore scorns what he calls "naturalism" and "scientism" and advocates what he calls "liberalism" (585). Quite probably, this is the reason why he neglected all forms of inductive, naturalistic and scientific metaphysics from Gustav Theodor Fechner to David Armstrong and beyond. One of the most important contributions to meta-metaphysics, namely *Metametaphysics. New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology* (edited by David J. Chalmers, David Manley and Ryan Wasserman, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2009) is mentioned only in a footnote (331, n. 3). The essays in this volume, Moore tells us, "do not exhibit the broader self-consciousness about metaphysics that I have in mind" (331, n. 3). After reading these essays, I find this verdict quite unfair. It seems that Moorean "liberalism" has its limits.

Final warnings: Who and how? Frankly, who could read the book with benefit? For undergraduates interested in the history of modern metaphysics it is certainly much too long, too difficult and too clumsy. Graduate students, however, might consult the weighty tome – with care. Here is how you should use the book: When working on the metaphysics of X (say Spinoza), read the chapter on X together with the Introduction and the Conclusion, then close the book for some time. When, after a while, you are working on the metaphysics of Y, read the chapter on Y (again, together with the Introduction and the Conclusion), then close the book again. And so on. Readers interested in the history of modern metaphysics will, thus, find a lot of pertinent and useful information. After all, Moore has read and digested an enormous amount of primary and secondary literature; what is more, he has imposed an interesting order on this wealth of material that often allows the readers to discover connections they overlooked before. Last but not least, readers interested in meta-metaphysics will find a lot of occasions for critical questions and discussion. In any case: Don't try to read the book in one go! Otherwise, you are likely to avoid in future books containing the phrase "making sense" or even all books on metaphysics. And that would be a pity.

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