

Stop Making Sense

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1 Introduction: Making Sense

Adrian Moore’s *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*¹—hereafter, *EMM*—is a remarkable book. In its 650 pages Moore surveys many of the most influential modern Western philosophers (Descartes and after), explaining, analysing, and relating their views.² Moore’s knowledge and understanding of the texts is patent. The book is clearly the product many years of careful reading and thought. Laudably, Moore is equally at home discussing so called ‘Analytic Philosophy’, so called ‘Continental Philosophy’, and their common ancestors. Any philosopher can learn and profit from this book.

I particularly admire the book for the way it weaves together history and philosophy. The modern academic teaching of philosophy in the Anglophone world can so easily give the impression that the history of philosophy is simply a story about how we got to where we are now—and so can be relegated to *mere* history, if one knows where we are now. For Moore, the importance of the history of philosophy is much more radical and important. One must give the lie to (*EMM*, p. 587):³

¹Moore (2012).

²Pre-modern Western Philosophy, and the Asian Philosophical traditions in their entirety, are absent from the book. Given its length, this is hardly a complaint—just an invitation to write another couple of books on the subject!

³Italics in this and all other quotes are original. Interpolations in square brackets are mine.

an enticing and prevalent misconception about the history of metaphysics: that its principle value lies in its indicating voices of yore that can be heard as participating in contemporary metaphysical discussions. On the contrary, its principle value lies in its indicating voices of yore that *cannot* be heard as participating in contemporary metaphysical discussion. It indicates voices that challenge whatever presuppositions make contemporary metaphysical discussions possible.

In the same way, the best way to understand one's own culture is to understand others.

The central concern of Moore's book is, as the title says, metaphysics, though Moore's definition of 'metaphysics' is a somewhat unusual one (*EMM*, p. 1):

Metaphysics is the most general attempt to make sense of things.

This sounds to me more like philosophy itself than metaphysics; but I have no desire to quibble about words. The topic is clearly a profound and important one; and whatever one calls it, making sense is the lens through which the discussion in the book is focussed.

If one is of a certain post-modern persuasion, one might think that the enterprise, so defined, is a forlorn one. There is no "master-narrative" which can satisfy such a global attempt. Moore is sensitive to the fact that ways of making sense are a plurality. They form a united enterprise for all that. Indeed, to suppose otherwise is, in some sense, self-refuting: the claim that there is no master-narrative is itself a master-narrative.

The enterprise is not for the faint-hearted, however. The most general understanding of how we make sense of things—or attempt to—must encompass, as Moore often and correctly stresses, that very project itself. The project is, therefore, an inherently self-referential one. Self-reference is, as we know, and as the reference to post-modernism illustrates, wont to lead us into contradiction. It is one aspect of this—but one central to Moore's book—which I wish to pursue in what follows.

2 Kant

More breaks up his book into three parts: *The Early Modern Period*, *The Late Modern Period I: the Analytic Tradition*, and *The Late Modern Period*

II: Non-Analytic Traditions (pl., sic). I will start by looking at Moore's discussion of one of the philosophers from each of these parts. In this section, we will start with Kant.

Kant explains how we can think about, and have knowledge of, phenomena, that is, things of experience; for to these, we can apply concepts. But he also holds that there are—indeed, must be—things beyond this: noumenal objects of various kinds. Such things are required by his accounts of free will, ethics, religion. In some sense, then, it appears that we can have thought and knowledge about such objects. But Kant denies that we can have knowledge of such things, since we cannot apply concepts appropriately to them. He says (A679=B707):⁴

We have no concepts available for ... [knowing an object in itself]; even the concepts of reality, substance, cause, nay, even that of necessity in existence [in the case of God], lose all meaning, and are empty titles for (possible) concepts, themselves entirely without content, when we thus venture with them outside the field of the senses.

Kant's philosophy, hence, is self-inconsistent: making sense of his project takes us, by his own lights, beyond the bounds of sense.

All of this is carefully explained by Moore (*EMM*, ch. 5).⁵ This leads him to formulate an aporetic argument that plays a central role in his book, and which he calls the *Limit Argument*, as follows (*EMM*, p. 135):

First Premise: The Limit Drawing Principle: We cannot properly draw a limit to what we can make sense of unless we can make sense of the limit.

Second Premise: We cannot make sense of any limit unless we can make sense of what lies on both sides of it.

Conclusion: We cannot properly draw a limit to what we can make sense of.

The argument is hard to gainsay. Something is a limit of a totality only if there are things on the other side of it: otherwise the members of the totality

⁴Kemp Smith (1933).

⁵For my discussion of the matter, see *Beyond the Limits of Thought*—Priest (1995); hereafter, *BLoT*—ch. 5.

merely extend indefinitely. Hence, to give sense to the notion of a limit of sense requires us to be able to give sense to what it means to be on the other side.

Hegel puts the point perceptively:⁶

[G]reat stress is laid on the limitations of thought, of reason, and so on, and it is asserted that the limitation *cannot* be transcended. To make such an assertion is to be unaware of the very fact that something is determined as a limitation implies that the limitation is already transcended.

Thus the limit aporia; and Kant seems to fall squarely afoul of its conclusion.

Moore does his best to help Kant out of the problem. We must distinguish between a “thick” sense of making sense, and a “thin” sense. The former is the way in which we make sense of the phenomenal realm around us. The latter allows us to have merely empty or regulative thoughts (*EMM*, p. 153). There is certainly textual justification for this distinction. Sensing his problem, Kant distinguished between a positive and negative notion of noumenon—an illicit one, and a licit one whose function is merely limitative (A255=B311). One might think of this as Moore’s thin sense.

It does not help, though. Kant was so unhappy with the distinction that he reworked it entirely in the second edition of the *Critique*; but to no avail. As Kemp Smith put it:⁷

[B]eyond thus placing in still bolder contrast the two counter-assertions, on the one hand that the Categories must not be taken by us as other than merely subjective thought functions, and on the other that a limiting concept is indispensably necessary, Kant makes no attempt in the new passages to meet the difficulties involved. With the assertion that the Categories, as such, and therefore by implications, those of reality and existence, are inapplicable to things in themselves, he combines, without any apparent consciousness of conflict, the contention that things in themselves must none the less be postulated as actually existing.

Quite generally, as Moore explains, Kant requires our grasp of the noumenal to go beyond the mere thin sense (*EMM*, 5.9, 5.10). In particular, it follows

⁶Miller (1969), p. 134.

⁷Kemp Smith (1923), p. 413f:

from Kant's view that his own philosophy itself must be of such a thin kind; but no one—Kant included—has ever understood the first *Critique* in this way.

Worse: moves such as this typically simply relocate the problem of self-referential contradiction, transferring it elsewhere.⁸ Grant such a thin notion of making sense. Then there is a general notion of making sense: either thick or thin. Kant's own philosophical ruminations must lie somewhere within this disjunction. But it, too, has its limits. After all, he accuses traditional metaphysicians, the dogmatists and skeptics, of doing something on the other side (e.g., *Critique of Pure Reason*, A739=B767 ff.). They cannot, according to Kant, be doing something in the thick sense; and they are certainly not doing what he is doing with such a thin sense; but they are clearly doing something of which Kant can make sense. (He must understand their enterprise in some sense, at least enough to take issue with it.) So we are back with the Limit Argument aporia.

3 Wittgenstein

So much for Kant. Let us now turn to (the earlier) Wittgenstein. A version of the Limit Argument is to be found explicitly in the *Tractatus*. In the preface to this, Wittgenstein writes:⁹

[T]he aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but the expression of thought: for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense.

Wittgenstein's contrast of thought and language is a somewhat odd one, since a thought, for Wittgenstein, simply is a proposition.¹⁰ So if the limit can be drawn in language—albeit when one side is nonsense—it can be drawn in thought in the same way.

⁸*BLoT*, p. 227 ff.

⁹Pears and McGuinness (1961), p. 3.

¹⁰*Tractatus* 3: 'A logical picture of facts is a thought.'

Anyway, the remarks presage the final *dénouement* of the *Tractatus*. States of affairs comprise objects, constituted with a certain form. Propositions comprise names, constituted with a certain form. Names refer to objects, and a proposition is true if the isomorphic state of affairs exists. It follows that only objects can be spoken of: forms, propositions, and other non-objects cannot. Propositions *show* their form, the propositions they express, and so on, and ‘what can be shown cannot be said’ (*Tractatus* 4.1212).

The rub, of course, is that the *Tractatus* says a lot of these supposedly unsayable things. Indeed, most of its statements are of this kind. As Russell puts it in his introduction to the English version of the *Tractatus*:¹¹

Everything ... which is involved in the very idea of the expressiveness of language must remain incapable of being expressed in language, and is, therefore, inexpressible in a perfectly precise sense. ... [One may have] some hesitation in accepting Mr Wittgenstein’s position, in spite of the very powerful arguments which he brings to its support. What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said...

Wittgenstein’s solution to the problem is well known. In the famous penultimate proposition of the *Tractatus*, he declares the book nonsense: what he appears to have said, cannot be said.

All this is carefully explained by Moore,¹² who takes up Wittgenstein’s distinction between saying and showing, as a version of the thin and thick senses of making sense which he deploys in his discussion of Kant. Ordinary contingent propositions of natural science describe the world in a ‘thick’ way, and so help us to make sense of it. What is to be found in the *Tractatus*—that is, Wittgenstein’s own *dicta*—help us to make sense of things in a different way. What is said is indeed nonsense; but important nonsense, since it shows something that cannot be said; it shows something non-propositional (*EMM*, p. 254):¹³

[T]he *Tractatus* is, on my conception of metaphysics, a profoundly metaphysical work, if a highly unusual one. It is designed to help

¹¹Pears and McGuinness (1961), p. xxi.

¹²For my own account of the matter, see *BLoT*, 12.3-9.

¹³I note that in the *Tractatus* there is, as far as I can see, nowhere where Wittgenstein suggests that this kind of nonsense shows anything.

us make maximal general sense of things. But since the sense that it is designed to help us make is non-propositional, the means that it uses are indirect. It works through a creative use of nonsense.

One might wonder what sort of creature it is, which is the understanding involved in a non-propositional sense of things. Moore gives us hints that it might be the kind of understanding that can be expressed through music (*EMM* p. 240) or action (*EMM*, p. 255).¹⁴

One may worry here that such understanding is not *essentially* non-propositional. After all, the know-how involved in riding a bike can be expressed in terms of the laws of physics, and cognitive mechanisms which respond to them; and the understanding of Mme Butterfly's situation can be described linguistically—if much more prosaically than in the music of the last act of Puccini's opera.

But more is at issue here. *Prima facie*, Wittgenstein's views *can* be expressed propositionally. They are, after all, expressed by the statements in the *Tractatus*. By all the standard tests of meaningfulness, these are completely meaningful. They are grammatical; we understand them; we can explain them. (Philosophers teach their content to their students!) Of course, there *are* things which one might call 'hidden nonsense': sentences such as 'it is 04.00 at the North Pole'. Arguably such statements are not so much meaningless as false. Chronological conventions assign no determinate time to a point lying on all lines of longitude. *A fortiori*, it is not 04.00 at the North Pole. But in any case, Wittgenstein's statements do not seem to be of this kind. When it is explained how geochronology works, one can see that there is something amiss with the statement about the Pole. However, when one grasps the ideas of the *Tractatus*, one's reaction is of an entirely different kind: the illusion—if it be an illusion—of understanding remains.

But what of the 'very powerful arguments'—as Russell puts it—that Wittgenstein brings in support of his position? Well, if they are indeed nonsense, they provide absolutely no ground for supposing their conclusions true, and so establishing that they are nonsense! Wittgenstein's position is, hence, self-undercutting.

¹⁴The relation between music and the inexpressible is explored a little further in Moore (1997), ch. 9.

4 Derrida

And now for something (not so) completely different: the views of Derrida on meaning.

A fairly standard view of the way that language works is as follows. Language talks about reality. The words of our language refer to things in this reality (be they objects, concepts, ideas, senses); and such reference gives language determinate meaning. (Derrida calls whatever it is that one takes words to refer to *transcendental signifieds*, and the view that such signifieds give language determinate meaning, *metaphysics*.)

Derrida rejects this picture entirely. Words used obtain their meaning by relating to other words, and to other uses of the same word. Meaning is constituted by this constantly changing flux of relations—by the play of *différance*, as he puts it. There is no determinate meaning. One may *interpret* words in a particular way. But interpretations are just more words, and are themselves subject to interpretation. No interpretation has privileged status as *the* correct interpretation.

There is nothing, then, that determines meaning. But when people use language, they do mean *something*; and what determines that? *Différance*. So there *would* appear to be determined (and therefore determinate) meanings. Not so, says Derrida. *Différance* is not itself determinate; *a fortiori*, it does not determine anything.¹⁵

[*D*]ifférance has no name in our language. But we ‘already’ know that if it is unnameable, it is not provisionally so, not because our language has not yet found or received this *name*, or because we would have to seek it in another language, outside of the finite system of our own. It is rather because there is no *name* for it at all, not even the name of essence or Being, not even ‘*différance*’ which is not a name, which is not a pure nominal unity, and unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and deferring substitutions.

Out of the frying pan, into the fire! Has not Derrida himself talked about *différance*, in the process using that very name? And isn’t he talking about something? Of course. He has exactly the same problem as Wittgenstein:

¹⁵Bass (1982), p. 26.

he has to say what he means without meaning what he says.¹⁶ More bluntly: Derrida *has* said—impossibly—what he meant.

Derrida is well aware of the situation. Here is what he says:¹⁷

I try to write (in) the space in which is posed the question of speech and meaning: (what is) meaning to say? Therefore it is necessary in such a space, and guided by such questions, that writing literally mean nothing. Not that it is absurd in the way that absurdity has always been in solidarity with metaphysical meaning. It simply tempts itself, tenders itself, attempts to keep itself at the point of the exhaustion of meaning.

When stripped of its Francophone frills, and expressed in blunt Anglo-Saxon, what Derrida is saying is exactly what Wittgenstein said: his words are meaningless—which gives rise to exactly the same problems as for Wittgenstein.

Again, all this is explained by Moore (ch. 20).¹⁸ Moore, however, throws Derrida a now familiar lifeline. Derrida cannot say what he means in a ‘thick’ sense. His words, however, convey something in a ‘thin’ sense—a sense which conveys something non-propositional (*EMM*, p. 537):

Why, then, if there is such a thing as non-propositional sense, should there not be a creative if unorthodox use of language which, given the meanings of the words in play, succeeds in conveying such sense? That is, why should there not be a use of language, perhaps involving language games in what might antecedently have been thought of as unsuitable contexts, perhaps involving neologisms, perhaps involving contradictions, perhaps involving nonsense, whose effect, because of the meanings of the words in play, is, if only as a matter of brute psychological fact, that those who encounter it, or some of those who encounter it, come to achieve a corresponding non-propositional understanding of things? And if such a use of language is indeed possible, then who is to say that much of Derrida’s work ... cannot be viewed as a case in point?

We have been here before. If Derrida does go in for games with language, this is unnecessary. His views can be expressed in quite ordinary and meaningful

¹⁶As Wood (1980), p. 225, nicely puts it.

¹⁷Bass (1981), p. 14.

¹⁸For my own exposition of the matter, see *BLoT*, 14.4-9.

propositions—and so ones that are not nonsense. I have expressed them thus, and so does Moore. He may use neologisms, but so do scientists, whose meanings are (presumably) thick. Reading Derrida does indeed have a psychological effect: we come to understand his views. Not because we appreciate nonsense-speak; and not in the way that we might hear an odd line of poetry, and are moved to think things by it; but because we understand the propositions put forward. (Contradictions, we will come to in due course.) And, again, as for Wittgenstein, the view is self-undercutting: if Derrida is not putting forward propositions, there is just no reason to suppose that what he says cannot be said can, indeed, not literally be said.

5 Moore Himself

So far so good. In the case of each of our three philosophers, we have seen them saying things that, when their own views are applied to their own views, cannot be said. Their own attempts to wriggle out of the situation seem to be of little avail. And Moore's rescue attempts in terms of some sort of thin notion of making sense, don't seem to help much either. These philosophers are simply caught *in flagrante d(el)icto*, contradicting themselves.

Of course, one might say 'so much the worse for these philosophers and their projects'. But this is not Moore's way. He takes it that they are on to something. Specifically, Moore holds that if one is in the business of making sense, there is something inevitable in the situations, something which betokens important non-propositional sense.

There is, as far as I can see, no general argument in the book for this conclusion, other than a sort of inductive one: all the smart philosophers who have essayed this project have landed up in the contradictory predicament; so that seems to be what must happen. There is just one hint of a general argument (*EMM*, p. 583):

I would suggest that even someone wedded to a conception of metaphysics whereby it is a pursuit of truth should acknowledge that it has a substantial non-propositional component of this kind. This is because I take metaphysics of any stripe to involve a significant element of self-consciousness.

'Self-conscious', here, I take to mean accounting for itself, and so self-referentiality. But how does this deliver the result?

An answer is given in another of Moore's books, *Points of View*—hereafter, *PoV*.¹⁹ The argument has two stages. For the first, Moore defines transcendental idealism as follows (*PoV*, p. 281 ff.):²⁰

- Something is *immanent* iff it is in the domain of a quantifier that can appear in one of our representations.
- Something is *transcendent* iff it is not immanent.
- *Idealism* is the view that some aspect of the form of that to which our representations answer depends on some aspect of the representation.
- *Transcendental idealism* is idealism with the rider that the dependence involved is transcendent.

One can see the views of Kant, Wittgenstein (in the *Tractatus*), and Derrida as versions of transcendental idealism, so defined. The things on which representations depend, and which are without the range of our quantifiers, are noumena, form (etc.), and *différance*, respectively. And transcendental idealism, so defined, is obvious self-contradictory, since it quantifies over things over which, it says, one cannot quantify. As Moore puts it (*PoV*, p. 166):

Transcendental idealism ... is designed to suppress our aspirations to make sense of what is transcendent, on the grounds that such a thing is impossible. Yet in precisely drawing our attention to what is transcendent, and signalling it as that whereof we should not try to make sense, it entices us to do the very thing it is designed to stop us from trying to do; and worse still, it requires that we do that very thing in order to assimilate it (transcendental idealism) in the first place.

But why accept transcendental idealism? Moore holds that we are drawn to it in the project of making sense because it seems to explain a number of things: 'there is a class of problems in philosophy to which transcendental idealism provides a general solution' (*PoV*, p. 117). Specifically:²¹

- It can explain the necessity of certain things. (Think of Kant's explanation of synthetic *a priori* truths.)

¹⁹Moore (1997). Thanks to AWM for drawing my attention to this.

²⁰*EMM* itself contains a somewhat terser definition of transcendental idealism (p. 142).

²¹*PoV*, p. 116 ff.

- It reconciles various incompatible thoughts to both of which we are drawn, such as: *had sentient creatures never existed, neither would the universe* and *the universe might have been such that sentience never appeared*. [The dependence on sentience is not immanent but, transcendent.]²²
- It can explain why it is that reality is constituted by things we can grasp in our thoughts.

So far so good. But how do we get from contradiction to non-propositional sense? This is the second step of the argument. Moore takes a leaf out of Wittgenstein’s book. He suggests that transcendental idealism is not just false; it is nonsense;²³ but very useful nonsense. It is the sort of nonsense one utters when trying to express certain ineffable insights, and so shows us something about making sense of things in a non-propositional way.²⁴

What to make of this argument? I find the first part eminently resistable. Necessity could be explained by some kind of essentialism. I find no appeal in the thought that there could have been no universe without sentience.²⁵ And that our thoughts apply to reality might be explained by the fact that we have evolved to operate in the universe, which requires at least a degree of conceptual adequacy.

However, let these matters pass. More pressing is the second stage of the argument. Moore’s position here has the same problems as that of his mentor, Wittgenstein. Moore explains what transcendental idealism is and the reasons for it; and we understand him. This is not poetry, where we have to “catch on”. It involves serious philosophical argumentation. The heart of Moore’s case for transcendental idealism is that it can do important philosophical work. Thus, it has explanatory consequences which can be compared with those of rival views. In the course of these considerations, we

²²Most important in the context of *PoV* is the pair: absolute representations are possible, and absolute representation are not possible. But discussion of this would require a whole essay on that book.

²³‘[T]ranscendental idealism is incoherent’, *PoV*, p. 120.

²⁴As the cover blurb of *PoV* puts it: Moore’s ‘fundamental idea is that transcendental idealism is nonsense resulting from the attempt to express certain inexpressible insights’.

²⁵*PoV*, pp. 117-8, quotes Dummett with approval: ‘what would be the difference between God creating [a universe that was throughout its existence devoid of sentient creatures] and his creating nothing at all, but merely conceiving of such a universe?’ Its existence, of course!

can recognise good and bad arguments. Reasoning with “nonsense”, then, has a logic. Logic presupposes contents that can be reasoned about. Say that these are not propositions if you wish, but the cost is that the notion of a proposition has now gone on holiday.

And to add insult to injury: if transcendental idealism is nonsense, so is Moore’s own view. Any definition of it, or claims about what it does, must also be nonsense. (Cf. ‘That the borogoves are mimsey has important explanatory power.’) Nonsense, also, are the arguments marshalled in favour of it. So they give us no reason to accept the truth of the claim that they are nonsense.

6 Infinity and Making Sense

There is another argument for the necessity of some non-propositional form of sense-making, not hostage to the fate of deliberations about transcendental idealism, which is worth tabling at this point. There is an absolute infinity of ordinals. Our means for referring to objects, and particularly ordinals, are countable. So there are many ordinals that one cannot refer to. Consider the phrase ‘the least ordinal one cannot refer to’. By construction, this refers to an ordinal, κ , that one cannot refer to. *A fortiori*, one cannot make any sense of κ propositionally. For, for a proposition to be about it, one must refer to it. However, one can make sense of it in some sense. Clearly, we have just understood something about κ . So there is something of which one can make sense, but not propositional sense.

We are not done yet, though. This is not, of course, a new argument: it is simply a version of König’s paradox.²⁶ The paradox continues: but we can refer to κ : we have just done so. So we can make propositional sense of it: we have, for example, the proposition:

(*) One cannot refer to κ .

Moore, I am sure, would not want to accept this paradoxical conclusion. There are various suggestions as to how one might avoid it, none commanding consensus. I suspect I know what Moore would say. When faced with this sort of situation so often in the book, as we have seen, he insists that one cannot make thick (propositional) sense of the situation in question.

²⁶ *BLoT*, p. 131 f.

Propositions such as (*) are meaningless, and simply indicate some non-propositional sense. Here, then, we have the argument for the existence of non-propositional sense: it provides a solution to König's paradox.

There are important details of this argument that would need to be filled out. Why, this time, is it that things such as (*) are meaningless? How, exactly, do they manage to indicate something non-propositional? And what exactly is it that they indicate? (Of course, one cannot answer the last question by stating what it is, but one had better say something, or the thought that they convey some sort of sense will be entirely empty.)

But set these things aside. This argument at least avoids appealing to transcendental idealism, and in particular, the arguments for it. The arguments for the inconsistency involved in König's paradox are notoriously difficult to gainsay. But the difficulties with the second stage of the argument remain. The paradoxical reasoning, for all the world, is propositional. Anyone with a basic knowledge of set theory can follow it. There seems to be little reason—other than that the reasoning ends in contradiction—to suppose that it is not constituted by propositions. And, again, if the “propositions” are nonsense, they provide no ground for the claim that they are nonsense.

Moreover, the argument shows that Moore's position, quite generally, faces exactly the same problem we saw Kant's view to face at the end of Section 2. There is, for Moore, a widest notion of making sense. Call this *making Sense* (capital 'S'). Consider the absolute infinitude of ordinals. There is no way one can make Sense of all of them. We certainly can't frame propositions about most of them. And even if we can indicate—in some sense—things about some of these, we can hardly do this about all of them. You can't individuate the individuals of an absolutely infinite totality by actions or other humanly available means. (A favourite theme of *PoV* is our finitude.) So by the properties of ordinals, there is a least ordinal of which one cannot make Sense. But one *can* make Sense of it. We can say that it is the least ordinal of which we cannot make Sense. This may not be a meaningful “proposition” but, given the train of thought being pursued, it may be taken to indicate something about the number in question. So one can make Sense of things of which one cannot make Sense.

7 Contradiction

And so to contradiction. *Beyond the Limits of Thought* considers various limits: the limits of expression, of iteration, of cognition, and conception. The book argues that the self-reference inherent in the limiting constructions makes these limits contradictory ones: there are things on the other side of the limit which cannot be on the other. The book does not consider the limit of what makes sense, but this limit is closely related to the limit of conception. If one can conceive of something, one is making some kind of sense of it; and if one can make sense of it, one must be able to conceive of it in some way or other.²⁷ It is not, therefore, surprising that the familiar pattern emerges in the limit case central to Moore's concerns. Conceiving—that is, trying to make sense of—what is beyond this limit delivers contradiction.

Moore, as we have seen, notes the contradiction involved, but takes this to be a sign that at least one of the statements involved in the contradiction is meaningless. As we also saw at the end of Section 5, the thought is a hard one to defend. Why does he not just accept the dialethic nature of the limit concerned?

The reason comes out most clearly in his discussion in *EMM* of Hegel, who, as we saw, thought deeply about the nature of limits of this kind, and who certainly does appear to endorse their contradictory nature.²⁸ Moore says the following (*EMM*, p. 183):

Now whenever we are confronted with a philosopher who departs from common sense in this way, with evidently serious intent, we seem to have a choice: either to accredit the philosopher in question with a non-standard view of things or to accredit him with a non-standard way of talking. I myself am attracted to the idea that, when a philosopher goes as far as to accept a contradiction, then strictly speaking only the second alternative makes sense; for unless the philosopher in question has his own idiolect, he is violating certain basic linguistic rules ... and is not strictly saying anything at all. ... When Hegel endorses a contradiction

²⁷Thus, for example, those who would argue that God is beyond conception, clearly conceive of God in the process. See *BLoT*, ch. 4.)

²⁸*BLoT*, ch. 7. In general, I am very sympathetic to Moore's exegesis of the philosophers in his cast. But I certainly part company with him on Hegel. My understanding of Hegel, the way his dialectic works, and the role of contradiction in it, are quite different from his. That is too large an issue to take on here; but see Priest (1990), (2013).

he is violating the rules that govern the workings of some of the words he is using: he is not using those words with their standard meaning.

It is important to note that Moore is certainly not writing off the Hegelean enterprise. The endorsement of contradiction is doing something—just not one of making propositional sense. But whether that is so, is exactly now the point at issue.

In what sense does someone who endorses contradictions violate linguistic rules? The sentence ‘the liar sentence is both true and not true’ is a perfectly grammatical sentence of English, as any standard grammar will attest. Moreover, by any such grammar, it is perfectly meaningful. According to a standard account of conjunction and negation, it is false; but it is perfectly meaningful. Nor do contradictions have zero content. (They say *something*.) According to Frege/Russell logic, they have total content: they imply everything. I might even note that it is Moore who appears to be flouting linguistic rules, since he takes perfectly good grammatical sentences of English to be nonsense.

Perhaps, then, the problem is not about meaning, but about endorsement. Moore seems to think that someone who asserts contradictions has ceased to speak standard English. This is just false. Native English speakers are prepared to endorse contradictions—and be understood as doing so—as various empirical linguistic studies show. Thus, they frequently utter contradictions to indicate borderline cases.²⁹ Maybe, one might say, such language is metaphorical. Maybe not.³⁰ But just like Hegel, I am a philosopher who endorses contradictions.³¹ I mean these things literally, and I understand these contradictions in exactly the same way that Moore does. I am, after all, just as competent a native english-speaker as he. And if he rejects dialletheism, it is because he understands exactly what I say: it is in virtue of this that he takes me to be mistaken.

Indeed, Moore takes such sentences not only to be false, but to be false in virtue of what the words ‘and’ and ‘not’ mean. I do not. That *is* a disagreement. It does not necessarily mean that he and I have different understandings of the meanings of those words. I do not know his views on the matter, but I assume that he would endorse some version of the standard

²⁹See Ripley (2013).

³⁰See Priest (2010).

³¹See, e.g., Priest (1987).

truth-conditional account of the meanings of these connectives. So do I. Now, in the semantics of paraconsistent logics like *LP* (and First Degree Entailment), the truth and falsity conditions—and so meaning—of the connectives are *exactly* the same as in Frege/Russell logic.³² Where Frege/Russell logic and *LP* part company is simply about whether truth and falsity can overlap (or underlap). This is not a semantic disagreement, but a metaphysical one. Compare Aristotle’s view that contingent statements about the future are not yet true or false (so that truth and falsity underlap). This is a metaphysical view about the determinacy of the future. And one may well take the fact that there are apparently obviously correct principles, such as the *T*-schema, which seem to deliver contradiction, to show that truth and falsity do overlap.

And even if Moore and I do have different views about the meanings of the connectives, the disagreement is hardly one where he is obviously right. Developments in the philosophy of language and logic in the last 40 years have taught us that delivering an account of meaning—even of just the connectives—is a highly fraught enterprise. It is not even clear what the right *form* of such an account should be. (Nor would the fact that Moore and I have different theories of meaning for the connectives imply that we mean the words differently: we just have different theories about what that meaning is.) However, all this is clearly far too big an issue pursue here. So I shall merely close this part of the discussion by noting that whatever disagreement there is here between Moore and myself cannot be brushed aside with a vague appeal to “linguistic rules”.

8 And in Conclusion...

It may seem that Moore and I are a million miles apart; and in some sense, we are. In another sense, the difference between us is a very small one. We both agree that accounts of making sense, when applied to themselves, appear to generate contradictions at the limits of sense-making. We also agree that this is no mere philosophical frill, but at the very core of a central philosophical enterprise. The difference between us is that where he sees nonsense attempting to express the ineffable, I see a plain dialetheia.

Both paths take contemporary philosophy off in an unorthodox direction. (What interesting philosophy does not?) But Moore’s approach seems

³²See, e.g., Priest (1998).

fraught with the problems that I have rehearsed. The arguments to the effect that the sentences in question are meaningless are self-undercutting; and there is no *independent* argument for this claim: they can appear meaningless only to someone already in the grip of a philosophical theory. Moreover, as we saw in Section 6 with respect to König's Paradox, Moore's approach seems to generate the same sort of "revenge" problem which he takes himself to be avoiding. A dialethic solution, on the other hand, simply requires one to accept that some contradictions are true. That this is radical in contemporary Western philosophy can hardly be denied. But the Law of Non-Contradiction was never as rationally grounded as those who like to trumpet it suppose. As far as I can see, the main thing that stands in the way of the dialethic understanding of the situation is this last bit of Aristotelian dogma.³³

So:—at the limit of making sense, we stop making sense; but we can make sense of some of the things beyond the limit: we can conceive of that of which we cannot conceive. Yes—and we can make sense of that too.

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