

BOOK REVIEW

On the Genealogy of Universals: The Metaphysical Origins of Analytic Philosophy. By FRASER MACBRIDE. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. vii+ 255. Price £53)

As the title suggests, this book provides a history of the universal-particular distinction in the early days of analytic philosophy. But it does more than that. How the early analytic philosophers related to the universal-particular distinction intersects with their evolving views about the nature of objectivity, thought, knowledge, representation, and more.

This book reveals that contemporary metaphysics has not had the last word on the universal-particular distinction. Tracing a debate that unfolded from Immanuel Kant down to Frank Ramsey, MacBride illustrates the extent to which the terrain is marked with potholes and pitfalls about which contemporary analytic metaphysics is often unaware.

Moreover, a taxonomy of fundamental categories cannot be drawn without an appreciation of all sorts of considerations drawn from metaphysics, language, epistemology, and perhaps from the empirical sciences. In short: this book will be of great value not only to those interested in the history of philosophy but to anybody interested in metaphysics, the nature of judgment, and the notion of logical form.

MacBride explains difficult notions with crystal clear clarity. Often, he then sums up what he's laid out with a creative, and often entertaining, analogy or metaphor.

Too much weight is often placed, by contemporary historians of philosophy, upon unpublished scraps, diary entries, and private correspondence—sometimes at the expense of texts that a philosopher *chose* to publish. This causes a distorted picture of the history to emerge.

MacBride, by contrast, adopts a broad perspective, from Kant all the way to Ramsey and beyond. This panoramic vision gives him a sense for when unpublished material was unpublished for a reason (for example, he has a sense for when the interpersonal politics of letter writing might be obscuring the real trajectory of the philosophical zeitgeist). He also knows when detailed

exposition of unpublished material is called for, in order to shine an instructive light on the terrain.

When MacBride gets down to the coal-face of textual analysis, some of the most recondite texts of the period, from Moore's early papers—often cited but rarely understood—to the work of Stout and Whitehead, yield to his power of interpretation. They reveal breath-taking philosophical vistas.

The logico-mathematical agenda of early analytic philosophy is well known. Likewise, Moore and Russell's revolt against the monism of British idealism has been well documented. But the story of the evolving metaphysical schemes of early analytic philosophy has been largely untold, until now. A brief summary of that story runs as follows.

It isn't analytic that the pair of concepts—substance and attribute—apply to the world we experience. Indeed, according to Kant, these concepts are every bit as problematic as our notions of cause and effect. Moreover, the two concepts are coeval. To think of attributes without substances, would be analogous to thinking of causes without effects.

Moore rejected Kant's transcendental arguments, which sought to render it an a priori *synthetic* truth that the concepts of subject and attribute apply to the world we experience. But Moore *did* recognise, like Kant, that (1) these concepts cannot be rendered analytic and that (2) they are coeval.

Moore's existential propositions—which, in his paper, 'The Nature of Judgment', form the fabric of his universe—say something like *redness here now*, which means that 'the concept "red" and the concept "existence" stand in a specific relation both to one another and to the concept of time' (quoted on p. 49). In this proposition, there is no privileged subject, nor a privileged predicate.

Since, (1) the distinction of subject and predicate has no application to Moore's fundamental propositions; and (2) Moore adhered to Kant's assumption that the concepts of subject and attribute are coeval, it follows that (3): Moore was not a nominalist—who only has room in his ontology for particulars—nor a Platonist—who only has room in his ontology for universals. Moore's concepts—the building blocks of his propositions—are neither universals nor particulars. Moore was a categorical monist.

Moore had no need for the subject-attribute distinction. But it was Russell who eventually formulated substantive arguments against categorical dualism.

Russell's argument against the existence of particulars had to do with their referential redundancy. If we try to explain what substance we're referring to, we inevitably appeal to one or more of its properties (pp. 76–80). Russell's arguments against *properties* state that (1) they cannot exist if particulars do not—like Kant and Moore, Russell accepted that these notions were coeval; and that (2) if every object is a bundle of attributes, then it turns out that every truth is analytic, since the predicate of any true sentence would automatically be contained in its subject (pp. 80–82).

The zeitgeist of early analytic philosophy did not tarry long with categorical monism. Once again, the action starts with Moore. In his paper, 'Identity', of 1900, Moore ends up appealing to particulars to explain how two things could be conceptually identical but numerically distinct.

MacBride is rightly unmoved by Moore's arguments here. The categorical monist already has the resources to make the distinctions that mattered (p. 97). If the proposition *C here now* and the proposition *C there now* can be distinguished by the different locations 'here' and 'there', then we have the resources we need to distinguish between conceptually alike entities, *C* and *C'*, without importing the machinery of the universal-particular distinction.

Moore's real reason for reverting to categorical dualism was his concern to defend the dictates of common sense. We commonly speak as if things can be individuated even before they've been located. Moreover, if *C* and *C'* were not *already* distinct, then it becomes a mystery why one of them could be related to one region of space, and the other to another.

In his *Principles of Mathematics*, Russell followed Moore in adopting a categorical dualism. But having defended categorical dualism in defence of common sense, Moore came to see—changing his mind over a single course of lectures—that *bearing a relation*, and *having a property* were different logical categories. And thus, the fundamental ingredients of reality do not divide neatly into two categories.

At this time, Whitehead and Stout were both striking out against categorical dualism too. Whitehead in the direction of pluralism, and Stout in the direction of monism. Stout's argument for (what might now be called) 'nuclear trope theory' emerges from MacBride's narrative as more sophisticated than many contemporary arguments for much the same view (p. 141). Stout also managed to balance an ontological pluralism (a belief that many things exist) with his ideological monism (a view that, in some sense, all things are one) (p. 133). It might be thought that this view compares favourably with Jonathan Schaffer's contemporary distinction between existence pluralism and priority monism.

Whitehead's categorical pluralism emerges from a philosophy of space, time, and the natural sciences that makes multiple categorical distinctions. His taxonomy extends to sense-objects, perceptual-objects, scientific-objects, and events. Whitehead's writings are sometimes difficult to decipher. MacBride works wonders in presenting Whitehead's intriguing ideas with perspicuity.

And yet, as Moore, Whitehead, and Stout were all moving away from categorical dualism, Russell was digging his heels in. Universals, he now insisted, can never appear as the subject of a proposition. This new stricture saved his theory of judgement from allowing a person to assert grammatical type confusions. As MacBride points out, in a beautiful twist of the narrative: the regimentation of Russell's dualism, as it interacts with his theory of judgement, actually brings Russell to the precipice of categorical pluralism (p. 182). Wittgenstein then takes us over that edge.

Wittgenstein's predecessors had appealed to various metaphysical categories in order to give propositions and thoughts the sort of internal structure and articulation required to represent the world. The picture theory, by contrast, allowed Wittgenstein to "explain how it is possible for us to represent reality, truly or falsely, whilst remaining open minded about the number of categories" (p. 188). It's interesting to reflect upon the extent to which this virtue is already available to Russell's theory of judgement—a theory that some have sought to revive and/or revise in recent years.

Russell had thought that his theory of judgement relied upon a categorical dualism. MacBride's insight is that Russell's theory of judgement—like Wittgenstein's picture theory—can be rendered neutral on the question of fundamental categorical taxonomy. This is an important observation.

Frank Ramsey is famous for his attack on the universal-particular distinction. But it's barely possible to understand his brilliance without the context that MacBride's book provides. Ramsey was working in the light of the entire history that this book sketches, drawing from all of its main characters. MacBride's chapter on Ramsey, like the book itself, is a *tour de force*.

As a metaphysician, MacBride has done more than any of his peers to encourage a metaphysical open-mindedness that leaves the strictures of categorical dualism behind (for example, MacBride 1999; 2004; 2005). This book provides an historical backdrop for that open-mindedness that should give us pause for thought.

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