Thanks to mid-twentieth century existentialism, the question of being and identity is possibly the most basic of the philosophical questions in our contemporary popular culture.

THE ESSAY

(The works listed are not a complete coverage of the contemporary field but to provide the best known and most significant in contemporary discussions. Apologies if anything important has been missed)

Many areas of contemporary philosophy have 'a handle' in public imagination, but what is considered as the first area of philosophy, metaphysics has an aura of mystery, even among the philosophers of the ancient art. For the best start on the long journey, is the entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy for 'Metaphysics', and its opening paragraph is thus:

> It is not easy to say what metaphysics is. Ancient and Medieval philosophers might have said that metaphysics was, like chemistry or astrology, to be defined by its subject-matter: metaphysics was the "science" that studied "being as such" or "the first causes of things" or "things that do not change". It is no longer possible to define metaphysics that way, for two reasons. First, a philosopher who denied the existence of those things that had once been seen as constituting the subject-matter of metaphysics—first causes or unchanging things—would now be considered to be making thereby a metaphysical assertion. Second, there are many philosophical problems that are now considered to be metaphysical problems (or at least partly metaphysical problems) that are in no way related to first causes or unchanging things—the problem of free will, for example, or the problem of the mental and the physical.[1]

The entry divides the territory between old and new metaphysics, each with its own primary conceptions for investigation. The essay will reflect on that schema but the key point of the Stanford entry came at the very end, the impossibility of metaphysics. The reasons varied:

- There is nothing to study where the answer would be possible (Hume);
- There are no truth values in metaphysical statements;
- The truth values of metaphysical statements are indeterminate;

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[1] van Inwagen, Peter and Sullivan, Meghan, "Metaphysics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/metaphysics/>.

- Metaphysical statements are meaningless (logical positivists).

And we now see a spectrum of philosophical argument that revives metaphysics by arguing its impossibility from:

- A weak thesis: metaphysical statements are meaningful, but human beings can never discover whether any metaphysical statement is true or false (or probable or improbable or warranted or unwarranted); to
- A strong thesis: all metaphysical statements are meaningless

For readers unfamiliar with the language, the terms 'weak' and 'strong' are value neutral – neither is presumed to be desirable. To prejudice a conclusion is unphilosophical, and hence metaphysics (at least) exists today in order that its impossibility is demonstrated; how it is demonstrated ironically becomes the metaphysical task.

The explanation so far infers a cyclical (or self-referential) problem in understanding 'metaphysics'. The historical approach may not solve this problem but by tracking the semantics, in time sequence, there is a workable clarity. The role of Andronicus of Rhodes or another editor of Aristotle's fourteen books was well-known to give the title, *Ta meta ta phusika* —"the after the physicals" or "the ones after the physical ones", referring to the other collected volume we now call Aristotle's Physics. So the term never had the original intention of Aristotle for his work, rather Aristotle spoke of 'first philosophy', 'first science', 'wisdom', and 'theology'. None of those ideas are necessarily inclusive or exclusive (a metaphysical statement). However, from reading the collected volume of Aristotle called 'Metaphysics', we can classify the subject-matter of the study as three questions:

- Being as such
- First causes of things
- That which does not change

There were developed from these three original questions, three more questions that developed as the main focus of metaphysics in ancient post-Aristotle and medieval philosophies:

- The categories of being; which introduces the following two ideas –
  - Universals ('present in' the members of classes as qualities and relations, which is said to 'subsist' or 'have being', but not a thing that exist in its own right)
  - Substances (the things that exist in their own right)

Here we have the classifications of the *old* metaphysics. More commonly understood today, the idea of Universals relates realism; the basic thesis of realism that there is a real world or

sphere of subsisting qualities and relations, present in the substance or appearance of things. The idea of substance has inferred various theses of naturalism; the basic concept of which is that there are processes over time-space, locked together as patterns. However, there is no universally accepted and precise definition of 'substance'. The general agreement is, though, a negative one, to say what substance is not. Substance is NOT:

- Universals and other abstract objects
- Events, processes, or changes
- Stuffs, as in water or air or fire or physical matter

The last rejected option for substance is surprising as common perceptions view the 'material' as substance. This is because the modern common sense view has been shaped by materialism; the view that only what is 'held' by human sense is real. In the contrasting intellectual tradition, Hume either denied that there were any substances or he held that the only substances were impressions and ideas. Hence, the metaphysics has produce secondary-order questions of the Idea and the Real, with different versions of realism and idealism twisting around each other in differing perspectives. The language is so nuanced in the evolving schema that Platonic realism is the very opposite of modern materialistic realism; and scientific realism is difficult to locate as a 'metaphysic'.

The seventeenth century changed the neat compartmentalisation of three or six questions to an inclusion of matters that had previously designated to the collected volume of Physics: the relation of mind and body, for example, or the freedom of the will, or personal identity across time. The reason was that the subject-matter of these further questions could not be classified as epistemology, logic, ethics or other branches of philosophy, not even physics. Hence, metaphysics began to be a catch-all category of matter that had outgrown its previous classification. Matters could also flow in the other direction. It was in the same century that 'ontology' was created as field of study where the study of being had outgrown the word and meaning of 'metaphysics'. Furthermore, following Hume's argument of 'understanding', British empiricists decided, that instead of the rationalist 'ontology', questions of being, cause, and change were now matters of observation and experimentation – the natural sciences. In the English-speaking and to a large extent, 'Protestant', world it was assumed that metaphysics was dead. However, in 'the continental world' there emerged a 'new metaphysics'. It was Christian Wolff, following after Leibniz, who was largely responsible for this development. Wolff distinguished between 'general metaphysics' (or ontology), the study of being as such, and the various branches of 'special metaphysics', which study the being of objects of various special sorts, such as souls and material bodies. The manoeuvre into the general and particular classification has since been challenged. Pursuing any particular question soon led into the sphere of general problems. Nevertheless, the 'new metaphysics' was following Leibniz's ideas of modality – a particular mode (way or manner) in which something exists or is experienced or expressed. Leibniz

developed an approach to questions of modality—necessity, possibility, contingency. Modality was the first field of the new metaphysics but other particular questions, separated from the 'general' enquiry, and created separate fields of metaphysics, and in time, many such questions become very large sub-fields of philosophy, having outgrown the 'new metaphysics' classification. Using the Stanford entry's terms, we can identify this space of the 'new metaphysics', albeit the impossibility of the classification:

- Modality
- Space and Time
- Persistence and Constitution
- Causation, Freedom and Determinism
- The Mental and Physical

The last field, Mental and Physical, is today more commonly thought of more in terms of Consciousness and Body.

The problem was in the scope of metaphysics which expanded beyond the tidy boundaries. There were, particularly, issues about the epistemic status of various metaphysical theories. The popular impression from the British empirical tradition was that science had replaced the outdated metaphysics, but this changed with Quine. On Quine's conception, metaphysics is primarily or exclusively concerned with developing generalizations from our best-confirmed scientific theories. From the mid-twentieth century, it was possible to see the continuity of metaphysics with science. Furthermore, historical consideration demonstrated that, as much there were philosophers who followed Hume's injunction to put metaphysics to the flame, the phoenix rose from the ashes. The Stanford entry provides a good example of paradigmatically metaphysical theses which shows the continuous passage which does not look like it will stop:

- "Being is; not-being is not" [Parmenides];

- "Essence precedes existence" [Avicenna, paraphrased];

- "Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone" [St Anselm, paraphrased];

- "Existence is a perfection" [Descartes, paraphrased];

- "Being is a logical, not a real predicate" [Kant, paraphrased];

- "Being is the most barren and abstract of all categories" [Hegel, paraphrased];

- "Affirmation of existence is in fact nothing but denial of the number zero" [Frege];

- "Universals do not exist but rather subsist or have being" [Russell, paraphrased];

- "To be is to be the value of a bound variable" [Quine].

The rest of the essay will endeavour to briefly sketch various contemporary rabbit-holes that were, or are, contained under the classification of metaphysics. In doing so, there are new questions, which re-frame the earlier questions across the new and old metaphysics. These areas of study would be better described as 'meta-metaphysics'.

Truth, Fact, Value

With the so-described 'Trumped' post-truth era, it is essential to begin with contemporary discussion on truth, fact, and value, even though this formatively is the area of epistemology. However, the epistemic statuses of metaphysical statements are inescapability first-order. The historical reason is that Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, were largely responding to the Skeptics, setting out the case that we can have knowledge and make judgements on matters. In the case of Socrates this claim is not apparent, and indeed is contested, but a view that the Socratic Method was a means to tentative judgement is the very grounds of academic skepticism in practice today. Peter Unger is an unusual modern philosopher in holding the case for the skeptical view that, not only can nothing ever be known, but no one can ever have any reason at all for anything. Unger's stance in *Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism* (Oxford University Press, 1975) is so hard that it follows into a militant Stoic view: we cannot ever have any emotions about anything: no one can ever be happy or sad about anything. No one can ever believe, or even say, that anything is the case.

Although the arguments of global skepticism are philosophically interesting, most philosophers can see that ignorance will not get us very far in acting in the world, at least not with benefits for ourselves and those around us. There is no possible advocacy for action, other than arbitrary choice with unknown consequences. There is, however, a far greater challenge to truth, fact and value. Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1979) is considered a contemporary classic, if such a genre could exist (in the sense that it is expected that the work has significantly changed the direction of thinking well into the future). Following Quine, Sellars, and Donald Davidson, Rorty argues that is important to opt out of the traditional objective-subjective dialogue in favour of a communal version of truth. For Rorty, what is 'true' is simply honorific knowers bestowing on claims the assertion of what 'we' want to say about a particular matter.

In other words, truth is relative to a group, and cannot be seen in the Cartesian sense which falsely relied on a representational theory of perception and a correspondence theory of truth, believing our experience or language might mirror the way reality actually is. Unless all conceptions of self are abandoned, the problem for Rorty's argument is failing to see the relativity between the individuals and the group in negotiating what is true. What 'we' want to say about a particular matter *matters* because all individuals do care about asserting

what they judge to be true, even 'grouped' skeptics. To assert that one does not care about anything would be a form of self-deception. The thinking here weakens Rorty's conclusion through the criticisms of perception and correspondence, if we accept that truth might be judgement or valuation on other terms, particularly interpersonal relations. This idea leads to the best counter-argument to Rorty's stance, from Bernard Williams' *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton University Press, 2002). Williams, as with most contemporary philosophers, agrees that the Cartesian method does not get us to a secure route to truth and knowledge (at least, in that the traditional faith is wrong to hold that the value of truth guarantees itself). Nevertheless, the postmodern critics are in error to think that this necessities a view that truth has no value.

These issues will be picked up in the session on epistemology, and will be explored with greater detail there. For the moment is it worth mentioning an easier read than Williams, Simon Blackburn's *Truth: A Guide for Perplexed* (Penguin, 2005). One further clarification on the epistemological grounding for metaphysical or even meta-metaphysical task has to be offered before leaving the subject for the latter session. As noted above, skepticism has been the driving force in western philosophy; in the effort to blunt the skeptics' attack on knowledge, and thereby undermine the sense of what there is, or is not. The school of American Pragmatism came up with a rather ingenious insight to the Skeptic's challenge. The global skeptic would never be satisfied with any counter-reasoning since the standard for knowing a truth or a falsehood was set at a 100%, a perfect logic without any doubt or error. The pragmatists realised that the global skeptics were in error for expecting too much. Doubt had to be an important part of the solution for truth and knowledge, and not merely as a metaphorical deceiving demon, a reductive tool, or a ladder discarded. Doubt and uncertainty had to be embraced as continuing values of truth and knowledge. The doctrine that describes this view is fallibilism – the principle that propositions concerning empirical knowledge can be accepted even though they cannot be proved with (100%) certainty.

Objectivity and Subjectivity

One metaphysical debate which has largely lost steam as a false binary is the argument over objectivity and subjectivity. Thomas Nagel's *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford University Press, 1986) is largely responsible. Nagel argues that our divided nature of internalising and externalising is the root of a whole range of philosophical problems, touching, as it does, every aspect of human life. On the external worldview we think of a vantage point that is 'nowhere in particular', the unique ability to view the world in a detached stance. Yet each of us is a particular person in a particular place, each with his own 'personal' view of the world, a view that we can recognize as just one aspect of the whole. The solution is not to inhibit the objectifying impulse, but to insist that it learn to live alongside the internal perspectives that cannot be either discarded or objectified. However, it is not *completely*

possible to reconcile these two standpoints--intellectually, morally, and practically. We can only do so fallibility.

The recent book, Tyler Burge's *Origins of Objectivity* (Oxford University Press, 2010), provides another approach to the question. Burge reflects on the science of perception and related psychological and biological sciences to provide an account of constitutive conditions for perceiving the physical world, and thus aims to locate origins of representational mind.

Abstract and Material Entities

Living in the Age of Trump and the commercialised religion of economics, one would have thought the philosophical materialists had won the day. The opposite is, in fact, true. In *Material Beings* (Cornell University Press, 1990), Peter van Inwagen argues that, strictly speaking, visible inanimate objects do not exist. The argument (as usual) is multi-layered across different questions but van Inwagen demonstrates that the question of existence is still very much alive; since Sartre reversed Avicenna's thought to come up with 'existence precedes essence'.

Universals and Nominalism

Brave souls also continue the debates on universals and proper names as another way of understanding existence. Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Searle, among others, developed variants of descriptivist theories, which said proper names either are synonymous with descriptions, or have their reference determined by virtue of the name's being associated with a description or cluster of descriptions that an object uniquely satisfies. Saul Kripke rejects both these kinds of descriptivism. In *Naming and Necessity* (Harvard University Press, 1972), Kripke adumbrated a causal theory of reference, according to which a name refers to an object by virtue of a causal connection with the object as mediated through communities of speakers. He points out that proper names, in contrast to most descriptions, are rigid designators: a proper name refers to the named object in every possible world in which the object exists, while most descriptions designate different objects in different possible worlds.

J.P. Moreland's *Universals* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1985) takes a very different approach. Moreland defend a traditional realist view of universals and examine the objections to realism from various infinite regresses, the difficulties in stating identity conditions for properties, and problems with realist accounts of knowledge of abstract objects. The work is very difficult to comprehend for a novice reader but it does explain the debate between Platonists and Aristotelians in the context of the relationship between properties and an

adequate theory of existence. It also provides a taxonomy of extreme nominalist, moderate nominalist, and realist positions on properties, outlining the way each handles the phenomena of predication, resemblance, and abstract reference.

Realism and Idealism

Oddly, the debates around the terms 'realism' and 'idealism' has been far more realised in political philosophy than in metaphysics. Two philosophers, who kept more to the traditional route, while overcoming simplistic binaries, have been Simon Blackburn and Hilary Putnam. Blackburn provided a far better and more nuanced approach to realism (the view that what we say is validated by the way things stand in the world) in *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford University Press, 1993). The figure of the 'quasi-realist' dramatizes the difficulty in the traditional realist-idealist debates. Realists will believe that they alone can give a proper or literal account of some of our attachments--to truth, to facts, to the independent world, to knowledge and certainty. Their idealist critics will counter with expressive and projective theories, and a relaxed pluralism that discourages the view that there are substantial issues at stake. Blackburn's argument is that we can maintain the realist attachments without any metaphysics which we call 'realism'. Through a rich consideration of the theories of value and knowledge, modality, probability, causation, intentionality and rule-following, and explanation, Blackburn provides an alternative to a primitive realist-anti-realist opposition.

Hilary Putnam's *Naturalism, Realism, and Normativity* (Harvard University Press, 2016) is a new work which revisits and revises his well-known past arguments. Putnam has a theory of naturalism which acknowledges that normative phenomena form an ineluctable part of human experience, thereby reconciling scientific and humanistic views of the world that have long appeared incompatible. Putnam takes a fallibilist approach through his rejection of the idea that an absolute conception of the world is obtainable; his criticism of a nihilistic view of ethics that claims to be scientifically based; his path-breaking distinction between sensations and apperceptions; and his use of externalist semantics to invalidate certain forms of skepticism.

Experience (Mind) and Nature (World)

The themes and questions above immediately bring attention to old ideas of mind (experience) and knowing an external world (Nature). Philosophers are allowed to change or modify their views, 'a change of mind' and 'shifting worldviews'. In *Representation and Reality* (MIT Press, 1988), Hilary Putnam, who had been the first philosopher to advance the notion that the computer is an apt model for the mind, radically revised his own theory of functionalism. Putnam argues that in fact the computational analogy cannot answer the

important questions about the nature of such mental states as belief, reasoning, rationality, and knowledge that lie at the heart of the philosophy of mind.

The arguments of mind and world inevitably will trace back to the problems of Cartesian dualism. John McDowell has done the most to explain these problems in *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1994). Popularly conceived views on philosophy tend towards naïve empiricism, empirical thought as rationally grounded in experience. McDowell identifies how we commonly fail to integrate in our understanding of the natural world what Wilfrid Sellars calls the 'logical space of reasons'. We do so, McDowell argues, because of a modern conception of nature. McDowell proposed, to circumvent philosophical difficulties, a return to a pre-modern conception of nature while retaining the intellectual advance of modernity. The problem of the modern argument had merely been a mistaken view that the earlier conception had been dislodged. Thus he makes room for a fully satisfying conception of experience as a rational openness to independent reality.

Internalism and Externalism (Philosophy of Mind)

The arguments of minds and worlds are an upper set of arguments to deeper and highly technical arguments of Internalism and Externalism. The externalists Hilary Putnam and Tyler Burge deploy Twin Earth thought experiments to argue that meaning and content often depend on matters outside the head. David Chalmers refers to the subsequent debates as the Twin Earth Wars. Chambers describes this as three acts of 'Star Wars', which is very helpful since the arguments are highly technical. In the first act, where "…the internalist empire slumbers in dogmatic confidence that the meanings of our words and the contents of our thoughts depend only on what is in the head", the externalist rebellion of Putnam and Burge took hold, to the point that the externalists became the empire. In the second act, internalist rebels strike back: David Lewis, Frank Jackson, and others argue that even in light of Twin Earth, there is a kind of narrow content that depends on what is inside the head alone. The externalists John Hawthorne and Junani Yli-Vakkuri and their work *Narrow Content* (Oxford University Press, 2018) brought about the third act. In the argument of Yli-Vakkuri and Hawthorne, the philosophical devise of the Mirror Man made the conception of 'narrow content' impossible. Chambers saw this devise akin to the 'death star' of the empire.

A related but very different argument in Philosophy of Mind is the argument of 'emergence'. Emergence would possibly be the internalist's 'narrow content' (this is my weak interpretation of a very difficult set of highly technical arguments). In Jaegwon Kim's *Essays in the Metaphysics of Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2010) an agent-centered first-person account of action explanation, the concepts of realization and their bearings on the mind-body problem, and the nonexistence of laws in the special sciences, is provided. The arguments flow through emergence and emergentism, the nature of explanation and of

theories of explanation, reduction and reductive explanation, mental causation and explanatory exclusion.

Determinants, Freedom, Agency and Action

The turn to new ideas of internal, external, and emergence has not defeated the traditional metaphysical questions of determinants, freedom, agency, and action, which has seen a resurgence in the last fifty years. The concept of action now occupies a central place in ethics, metaphysics and jurisprudence. Helen Steward's *Agency and Action* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) helps to understand the discussion around the nature of actions themselves; how the concepts of act, agent, cause and event are related to each other; self-knowledge, emotion, autonomy and freedom in human life; and the place of the concept of action in criminal law. In her recent book, *A Metaphysics for Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2012), Steward argues that determinism is incompatible with agency itself--not only the special human variety of agency, but also powers which can be accorded to animal agents. Steward offers a distinctive, non-dualistic version of libertarianism, rooted in a conception of what biological forms of organisation might make possible in the way of freedom.

Self, Non-Self ('Other'), and Personal & Social Identity

A common perception of philosophical thought usually begins with the idea of self – who I am as a person and my identity as a person. Descartes' shadow is still well-cast upon the modern mind. The themes so far considered – Truth, Fact, Value; Objectivity and Subjectivity; Abstract and Material Entities; Universals and Nominalism; Realism and Idealism; Experience (Mind) and Nature (World); Internalism and Externalism (Philosophy of Mind); and Determinants, Freedom, Agency and Action – has greatly reshaped the understanding of 'Self', personality and identity. Today, there are many philosophers who, if not done away with the concept of self (a non-self) – denying that their own experience provides them with even an imagined self, have refigured personal identity in very different ways to Descartes' formulation. With the traditional arguments, there exist different alternatives of understanding 'self', as follows:

- Self as an activity
- Self independent of the senses
- Bundle theory of self
- Self as a narrative center of gravity (convenient fiction)
- Self as an indispensible syntactic construct, not an entity
- No conceive fixed self but 'I have no self' is also mistaken (The Buddha)

The existentialist Bernard Williams has done the most to explore the problems and new formulations, and is brought together as *Problems of the Self. Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (Cambridge University Press, 1973). Williams, who has a strong turn to historical understanding, criticised the Lockean view of memory as the holder of personal identity. Williams, instead, points to what others call an 'Embodied Self'. This is not a return to Cartesian dualism, but Williams recovers in Descartes the truth of his reductive method while rejecting both a reductionist void and the attempt to resemble back to a presumed former view of self through memory.

The other passage to the common and modern understanding of self is from Kant, who is also a target of Bernard Williams' criticism. Christine Korsgaard*'s Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford University Press, 2009), however, is a contemporary exploration of the self through the work of Kant. Korsgaard demonstrate how people determine their own actions through these Kantian terms.

The question of self and personal identity cannot escape the question of the 'Other' and social identity. One might reject simple binary, but if in binaries we have the inescapable language then one part cannot exist without the other. Amie Thomasson's *Social Metaphysics* (Routledge, 2016) looks at the necessary other half, on the metaphysics of social groups: first, Are there any? And second, What are they?

One of the problems of binaries, and even scaling them out, is to assume an imagined privileged position, as critiqued by Thomas Nagel (see above). In *Realism with a Human Face* (Harvard University Press, 1990), Hilary Putnam rejects the contemporary metaphysics that insists on describing both the mind and the world from a God's-eye view. His goal is to embed philosophy in social life. Alternatively to the highly technical arguments, indicated above, Putham argues for pluralism. He rejects a view of philosophy that is a closed systematic method and provides an inventory of the basic furniture of the universe or to separate reality in itself from our own projections. Rather it must become a human practice connected to real life.

Metaphysics and Ethics

Putnam brings us finally to the question of metaphysics and ethics. Bernard Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 1985) is the most well-known and contemporary work on the subject. His sustained indictment of systematic moral theory from Kant onward and offers a persuasive alternative, reorient ethics toward the individual. Williams' challenge is why should a set of ideas have any special authority over our sentiments just because it has the structure of a theory? Williams accuses modern moral philosophers of retreating to system and deserting individuals in their current social context. He believes that the ethical work of Plato and Aristotle is nearer to the truth of what ethical

life is, but at the same time recognizes that the modern world makes unparalleled demands on ethical thought. In Williams' argument, Kant's ideas involved a view of the self we can no longer accept (see above). On the other hand, the alternative modern theories such as utilitarianism and contractualism usually offer criteria that lie outside the self altogether, and this, together with an emphasis on system, has weakened ethical thought.

Williams' criticisms said very little on what was offered by mediaeval philosophy, and some philosophers see the opportunity to refashion that worldview in modern analytic terms. David Oderberg's very recent book, *The Metaphysics of Good and Evil* (CRC Press, 2019), is one of the best examples. In Oderberg's work, the core ethical theory of Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and of most medieval and Thomistic philosophers, is defend. Goodness is analysed as obedience to nature. Evil is analysed as the privation of goodness. The privation theory of evil is given its most comprehensive contemporary defence, including an account of truthmakers for truths of privation and an analysis of how causation by privation should be understood. In the end, all evil is deviance – a departure from the goodness prescribed by a thing's essential nature.

The themes of the recent Oderberg's book also appeared in other important works of the last thirty years. Iris Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Penguin Books, 1992) is an important bridge that allowed traditional ethical attitudes to transverse the early postmodernist chasm of the 1990s. In Raimond Gaita's *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (Routledge, 2004; revised from 1991), we have the only Australian in this essay. Gatia takes the oppositional argument to Bernard Williams' contention that ethical understanding was not an absolute conception, in the way science is; i.e. all scientific statements converge in an absolute understanding of the scientific method, but ethical statements could never be conjoined under a similar conception of an absolute principle or thought.

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