

# The Somerville Group and (the Re-emergence of) Metaphysics

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Andrew Wyeth (1948) *Christina's World* MoMa, New York





My main aim is to argue against a common story about the re-emergence of metaphysics in analytic philosophy by arguing that a form of self-consciously metaphysical theorising understood as an investigation into our conceptual schemata was alive and well, especially in Oxford, even during logical positivism's and ordinary language philosophy's heyday.

This tradition continues to the present via the influence of philosophers such as Collingwood, MacKinnon, Anscombe, Murdoch, Foot, Midgley, Taylor, MacIntyre, and Williams.

# Aim

# The ‘Usual Story’

There are four main ideas that have contributed to the rise of analytic ontology. In rough chronological order, these are: Quine’s naturalistic conception of ontology, Strawson’s revival of what he calls ‘descriptive metaphysics’, the essentialist metaphysics derived from Kripke’s and Putnam’s realist semantics, and the Austro-Australian ‘truth-maker principle’ (Glock 2002: 238; cf. Glock 2012:391).

**Hans-Johan Glock**

Among those with an outdated or partial conception of analytic philosophy, the whole movement is associated with the rejection of metaphysics. But such rejection, however motivated and justified, was never the sole prerogative of analytic philosophy, nor was it ever the majority view within that movement. Early analytic philosophers engaged with metaphysics without compunction, and it was only during the ‘middle period’ of the 1930s-1950s that, under the influence of logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy, metaphysics was first rejected and later marginalized. It is this publicity catching period that is often taken *pars pro toto* (Simons 2013:709).

**Peter Simons**

From 1945 until the end of the 1950’s analytic philosophy evolved in Britain and elsewhere without any metaphysical pretensions, and, on the whole, without much attempt to aspire to the degree of generality characteristic of the ontological and metaphysical pronouncements of the great system-builders of the past. In 1959, however, Strawson published his rightly renowned book *Individuals*. It operated at dizzying heights of generality hitherto unknown among post-war British analytic philosophers, and it professed unashamedly to be an exercise in metaphysics—it was, as its subtitle announced, ‘an essay in descriptive metaphysics’ (Hacker 2003: 49).

**P. M. S. Hacker**

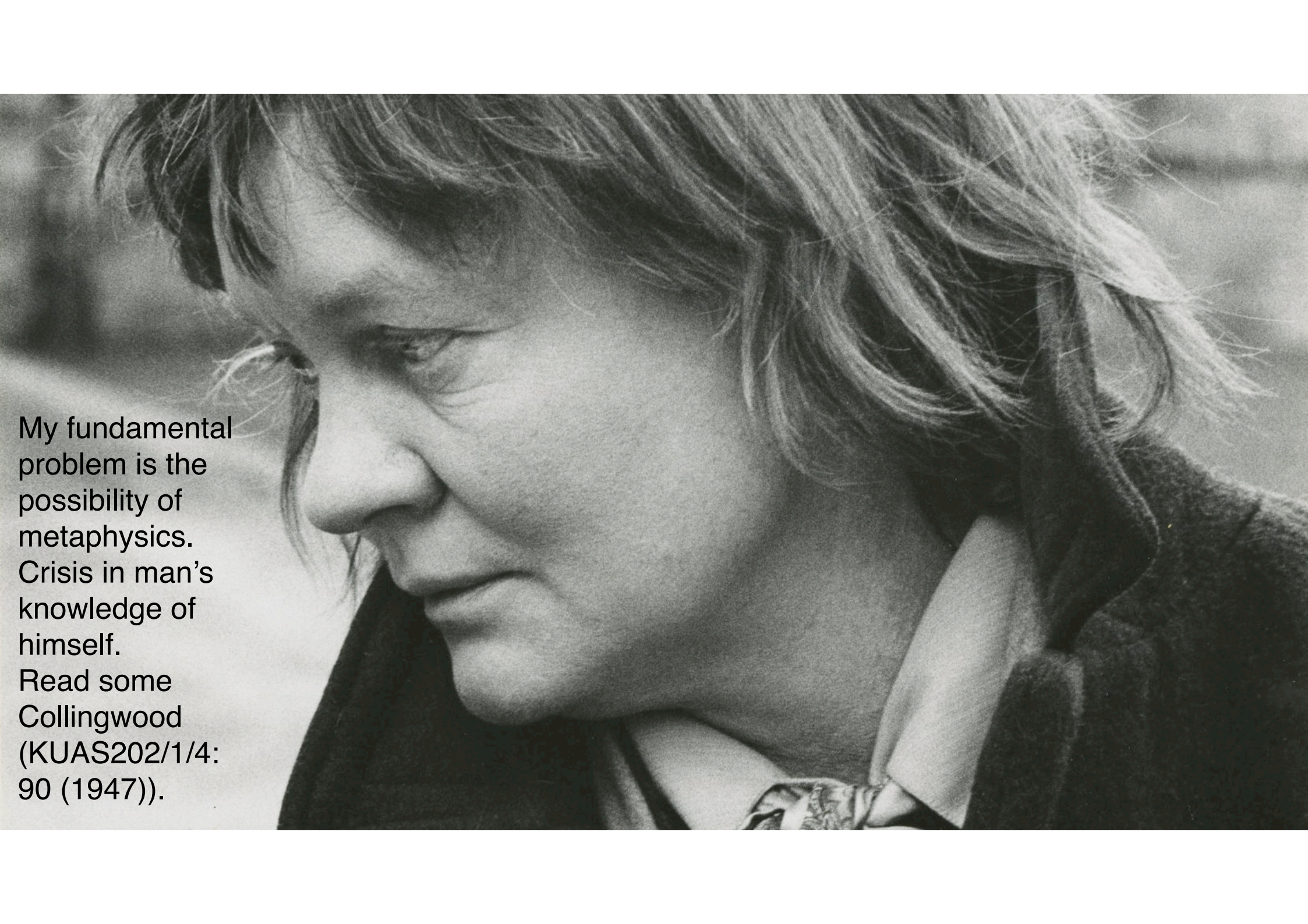


There is a tradition where metaphysics is understood as emanating not in novel facts but in a vision and an accompanying understanding of its **underlying conceptual schemata**. Against the background of this tradition—neglected as it is by contemporary history of analytical philosophy—the usual story of the re-emergence of metaphysics that takes as its starting-point Strawson's *Individuals* (1959) must be amended in the light of the efforts of the likes of **Collingwood**, **Price**, and **MacKinnon** in the 1930's and 1940's.



J. M. W Turner (1810) *High Street, Oxford* Ashmolean Museum, Oxford



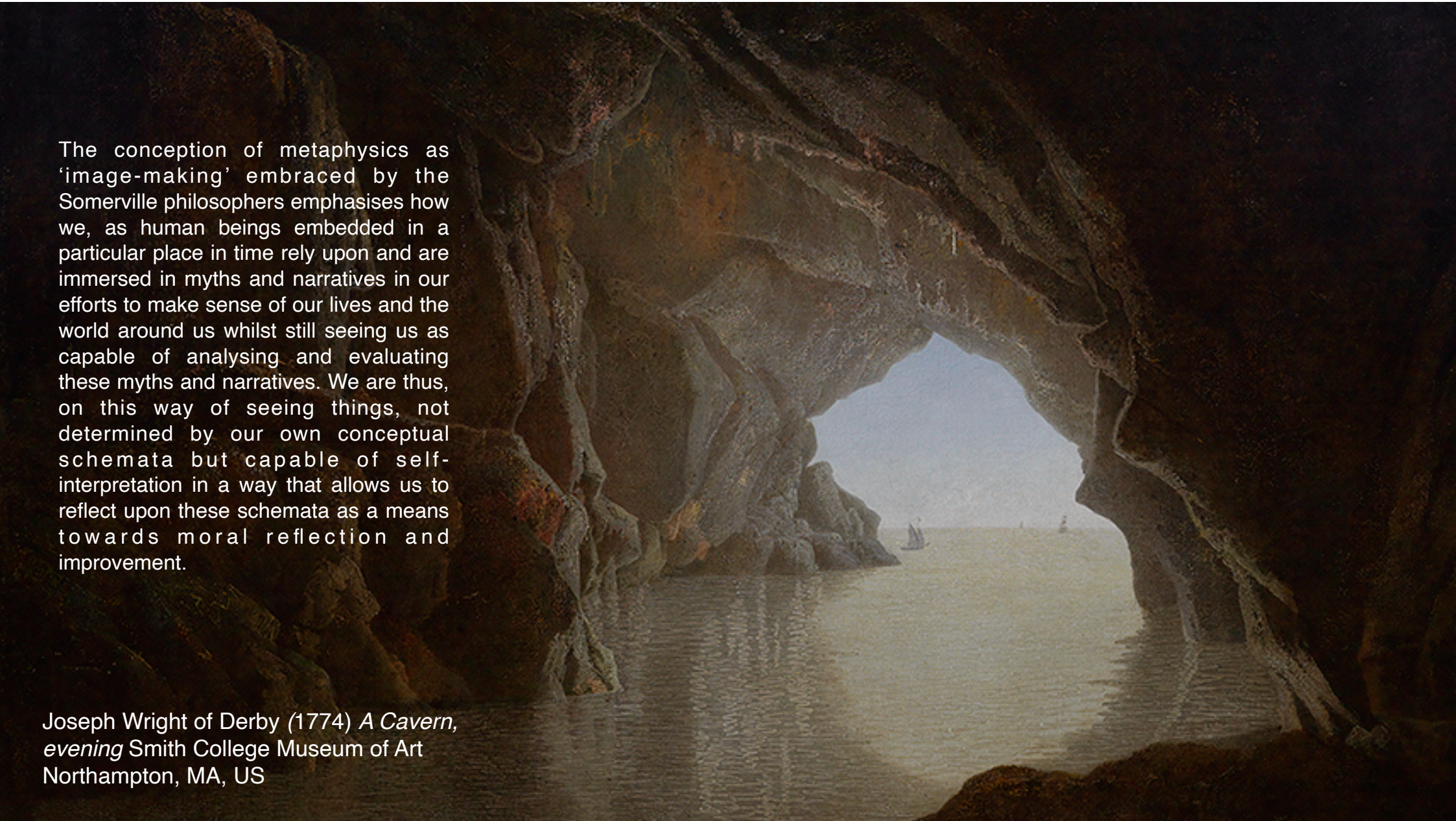
A black and white photograph of a woman with short, wavy hair, looking down and slightly to the left. She is wearing a dark jacket over a light-colored collared shirt. The background is blurred.

My fundamental  
problem is the  
possibility of  
metaphysics.  
Crisis in man's  
knowledge of  
himself.  
Read some  
Collingwood  
(KUAS202/1/4:  
90 (1947)).



The conception of metaphysics as 'image-making' embraced by the Somerville philosophers emphasises how we, as human beings embedded in a particular place in time rely upon and are immersed in myths and narratives in our efforts to make sense of our lives and the world around us whilst still seeing us as capable of analysing and evaluating these myths and narratives. We are thus, on this way of seeing things, not determined by our own conceptual schemata but capable of self-interpretation in a way that allows us to reflect upon these schemata as a means towards moral reflection and improvement.

Joseph Wright of Derby (1774) *A Cavern, evening* Smith College Museum of Art  
Northampton, MA, US



# Sure, but is it metaphysics proper...

...since these theories doesn't seem to 'carve nature at its joints' but rather to describe our 'fundamental conceptual scheme'?

- *Demarcation*: These theories seem to provide criteria of demarcation—in terms of e.g. Collingwood's absolute presuppositions, Strawson's indispensable conceptual core, or MacKinnon's existentialist 'what?'-questions (or for that matter Wittgensteinian 'norms of representation')—that seem to overlap with traditional metaphysical issues (and seem to be dealing with the 'right' kind of necessity).
- *Self identification*: the philosophers I've talked about saw what they were doing as instances of metaphysical inquiry, which ought to count for something (even if that doesn't preclude classifying their activities as attempts at formulating some kind of *ersatz-metaphysics*).
- *Generality*: What these figures were discussing seems more general and fundamental than ordinary conceptual analysis (and to be stated in terms of propositions that aren't empirical, nor analytical truths).
- *Tradition*: Even if it is certainly to go too far to argue (with Price) that all the great metaphysical system-builders of the past were merely advocating for 'alternative modes of conceptual arrangement' it is still arguably the case that Aristotle's interest in the *phainomena* can plausibly be understood as describing our 'life-world' or 'fundamental conceptual schemata' (see e.g., Nussbaum 1989: Ch. 8; Quine's concern for scientific theories can be similarly interpreted).
- *Theoretical cost*: Closing the concept 'metaphysics' in such a way as to include only attempts at 'carving nature at its joints' comes at a considerable theoretical cost in that it might exclude too much (does Quine count, does Thomason?).

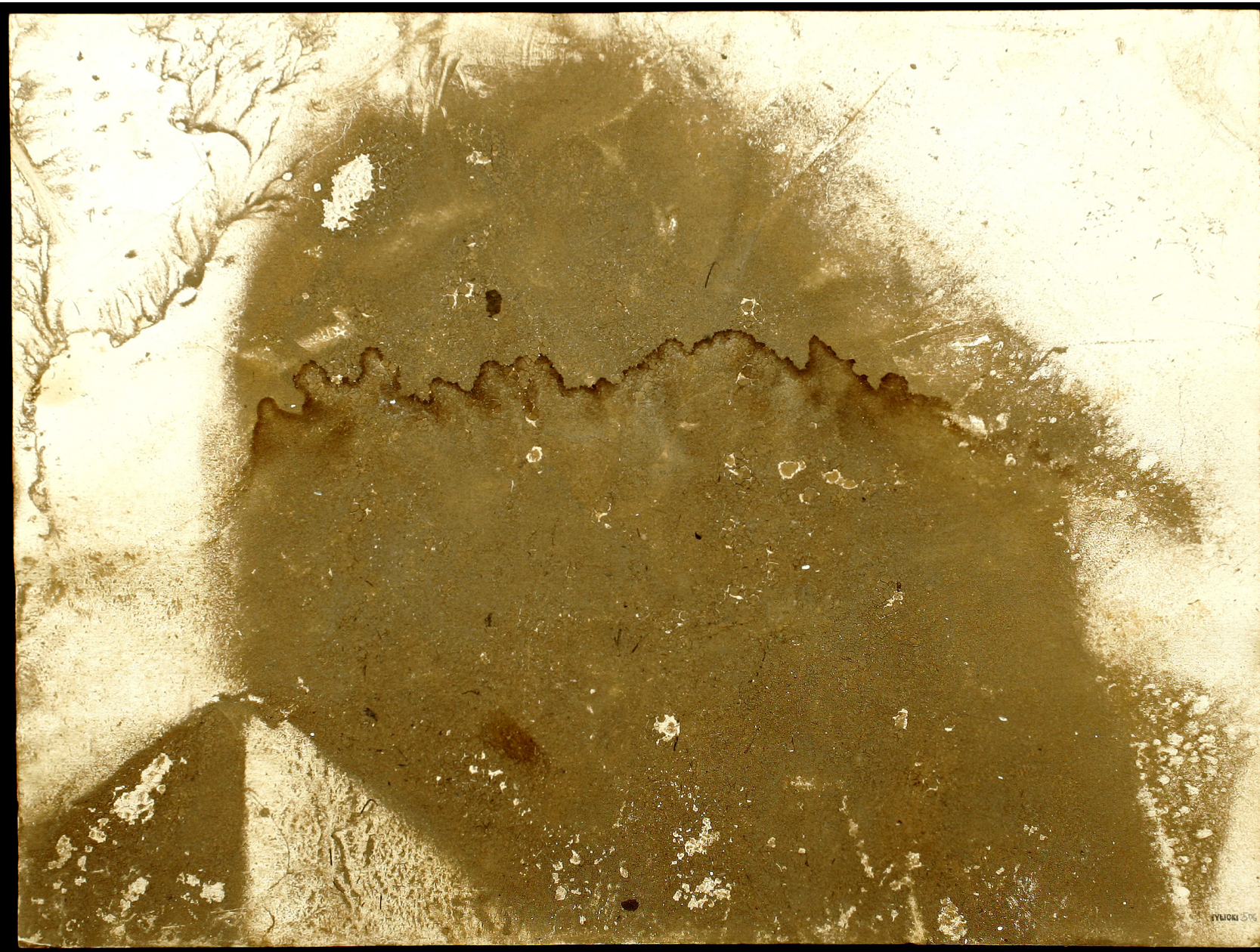


➤ John Everett Millais *Chill October* (1870)

# A return to metaphysics

Murdoch's Platonist mysticism, Foot's 'Aristotelian necessities', Anscombe's Analytical Thomism, and Midgley's non-reductivism concerning 'human nature' arguably results in a return to metaphysics proper.





All that I have said here is obviously part of a much larger story that needs to be told about **'metaphysics'** as a **contested concept** throughout western philosophy.

**Thank  
You**

Jacek Tylicki *Museum paper board left on the bank of the Höje river for 4 days* (1981)