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# Plurality in Contemporary 'Ontologies': A Critical Reflection

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## Abstract

Ontology is generally thought to be the study of the nature of being or, to put the definition in more contemporary terms, the study of what kinds of things (or 'entities') are essentially there. For example, in deciding the ontological status of an individual, the fundamental problem facing us is, roughly, the problem of universals: because it is agreed that there are particular or singular objects, the problem becomes one of forming a consensus on whether there are abstract objects. Given, however, that there exist particulars, another problem arises about the nature of those particular entities; an example of this problem is the mind-body problem where it is to be decided whether human beings are constituted by two kinds or only one kind of entity. The reductionist approach to the question of dualism tends, roughly, to reduce the mental to the physical (or, more broadly, the material). The phenomenalists, on the other hand, would say that although material objects exist, they are more 'derivative' rather than basic in nature1. For some minds, plurality does not, by itself, imply a decline in explanation; the reality, for them, manifests itself in innumerable ways.

Our task in this paper is not to venture into the prefatory questions about a synthesis, or to use a less ambitious term, 'compromises' between the two positions. The task is more modest: to reflect on the revival of ontologies. The aims of this paper will be 1) to provide an exegetical, although limited, view on the contemporary 'ontologies' – world-views that are apparently irreconcilable; and 2) to try and reflect on this question of ambivalence, arguing that it would be more prudent to deeply reflect and analyze the problem rather than attempt a synthesis. It would not come to us as a surprise, however, if a cursory discussion on the attitudes latent in this division between opposite ontological theories comes at some point in this paper. However, that discussion would, at best, be a supplement, a derivative, rather than one of the central points of the paper.

**Keywords** – Ontology, Contemporary Philosophy, Phenomenology,

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## I

It is quite difficult, although not impossible, to refer to an absolute point of origin to a specific question in the history of thought. Thus, it is not the task of a philosopher to dispute the conventional position that considers Aristotle to be the father of ontology as distinct from other questions within the realm of Western philosophy. A comfortable reference can be easily made to his one of the more prominent dictums on the different 'senses' of being: "that which is may be so called in many ways" (Aristotle and Ross 1003a33). Shortly after, he says that "Such things as signify the schemata of predication are said 'to be' per se. Because "to be" "signifies in the same number of ways as these are spoken of" (Aristotle and Ross 1017a23; Kung 3). Neither is it feasible to follow Aristotle's 'trajectory' of thought through the scholastic regime to the neo-Kantian period.[2] It is taken for granted that there exists a general awareness in the reader about the background of contemporary ontologies that have garnered attention and the conditions that have affected their origin. We shall, thus, focus on the principal directions that determine the fundamental characters of these ontologies.

The logic that binds Aristotelian ontology is founded on a theory of judgement. Judgement becomes the pivot that directs every attempt to construct an ontology (if it is to be seen as a construction into the discipline of philosophy). It is always, in Aristotelian ontology, to the relation with the starting that every meaning given to the term 'being' is determined. The Thomistic distinction between 'Ens rationis' and 'Ens Naturae', i.e., being 'being of reason' and 'a real being' (Audi 266), at the very outset, represents our first encounter with two possible ontologies (or 'options' open to our ontology as Quine chose to put it). If being can be attributed meaning(s) only by three functions of judgment – the predicative, the affirmative, and the existential – an ontology such as this can never be anything but a philosophy in the bounds of the Aristotelian theory of judgment

However, if one is to lay more focus on the being or thing that acts as a measure of the validity of the judgement solely by virtue of its independence from the latter, such type of ontology will become an ontology in a 'realistic' sense; ontology should bear a general relation to the real world:

> "…which may be compared to a set of architect's plans and an actual house. There may also be, let us suppose, a child's sketch of the outline of the house, drawn broadly in two dimensions. And in addition there may be the drawing made by an adult amateur after he had gone through the actual house and tried to recall it. Finally, we have the architect's blue- prints, made before the final alterations. In each of these drawings we have something true about the house, though in none of them do we have the whole of the truth." (Feibleman 50)

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A 'preoccupation' with ontology, then, closely knitted to this realistic interpretation of being. Thus, the second meaning, out of the two described above, had been more or less central in deciding the meaning of ontology.

The realistic sense of being, however, was not without its ambiguities. Being qua being, through its utmost generality, risked becoming purely an empty, abstract notion. A number of thinkers have taken extreme steps to equate this being with the supreme being (or God) and, thus, synonymize with plenty of determinations. The dialectical materialists, on the other extreme, argued for a being that is most accessible to us – the res, i.e., the material object. We can see that a reciprocity of determination and indetermination is at play in the concept of being. In order to protect the question of being from these sways of determination and indetermination and to maintain 'neutrality' in ontology, the 'fundamental ontologies' have directed themselves to an attempt to discover a 'purified' sense of being. For them, Being *qua* being is the governing principle of the regions in constitutes. It is the ground of all its possible "configurations" and ontology's task is to discover what constitutes this ground itself; it is neither material nor spiritual; neither an object nor a subject. Here, too, two distinct ways open up that are subject to philosophical interpretation: if being is not an 'object' in the sense of the term used today, and if it must be a union of everything that transcends its every 'region', then how being can be the "possibility of everything".[3]

If we identify this possibility with a system of general determinations, ontology will be reduced to a theory of modalities or, to use a term with an Aristotelian hue, 'Categories'.

Nicolai Hartmann is one of the most structured thinkers who thinks of ontology in this sense; Categories, according to Hartmann, are "*general principles of being*" (Stegmuller 236); they, along with their laws, are "the true unity pattern of the real world" (Hartmann 574) that replace monistic or reductive metaphysics. For Hartmann, Kant did not intend to produce a deduction of categories of thought from the experienced things; rather, according to him, Kant intended to justify the "objective validity of categories within the range of possible experience" (Smith 590). Again, Hartmann denies all the three definitions of categories, i.e., 1) as real predicates, 2) as forms of thought, and 3) as functions of language:

> "On Hartmann's view categories can only be obtained (the problem of Kant's "metaphysical deduction") from an analysis of concrete objects and the empirical knowledge concerning their behavior in our possession…[they] can only be justified by their actual pervasiveness in the natural world and the adequacy with which they express the structure of all individual things." (Smith 591)

Thus, the identification of being with determinations would consider relations to be the ultimate answer to the question about the grounding of being. The only difference between Being (the transcendental) and beings is of levels; existence remains the same through every sphere.

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The second way is to consider being as an act, limited by its determinations, rather than a system of determinations. Being is to be thought of as the source of all the 'contractions' into whose limits it is confined. This act, however, is difficult to conceptualize. The closest possible presentation of this theory is Martin Heidegger (although being as act is not limited to his ontology). It is obligatory to remind the reader that Thomism, in one sense, can be thought of as an ontology of actus essendi. Heidegger had revisited the same question asked by Hartman: the clarification of the meaning of being.4 What he has done, and with all due credit to him, is to reflect on language and its history. The following passages would disclose his reflections on truth and its implications, and on the notion of being itself.

History does not maintain its alleged indifference to the question about the meaning of being; it discloses its meaning in a chain of 'representations' closely linked to the extent that it obscures its meaning. It is this dynamism that is made evident to us which, formerly, seemed static. It is the law of becoming, originated from its Greek sources5, that drove the current of western philosophical positions on being. 'Being', in the Greek tradition, was understood as substance, i.e., ousia, and presence, i.e., Parousia. Logos was thought to be co-substantial with being. Ousia and Physis (i.e., nature) are two terms that act as evidence of a world free from any inertia. Thus, the roots of the word 'being' suggest a self-subsisting, active being. If ontology, according to Heidegger, is to have a revival, it must return to its ancient origins of action rather than simply being a formalistic notion. The evolution of Western thought has been marked by retrogressive tendencies rather than progress. The result, thus, is a continual loosening of grip on the question of being:

> "To be sure, within the purview of metaphysics, and if one continues to think in its manner, one can regard the question about Being as such merely as a mechanical repetition of the question about beings as such. The question about Being as such is then just another transcendental question, albeit one of a higher order. This misconstrual of the question about Being as such blocks the way to unfolding it in a manner befitting the matter." (Heidegger 19)

The impression of such emptiness seems impossible to dismiss. If one is rational enough to differentiate between 1) the word, 2) its meaning, and 3) the thing it refers to, the 'being' as used in the ordinary sense would be a difficult term to have a correspondent out of the three. An object is more than the sum of its parts; yet, what would come asking about its being? The question itself presupposes that being would add another determination to those already constituting the object. Such a presupposition is, arguably, the source of illusion of the emptiness of being. Being is to be considered as a continuum that can be contained in our regional determinations of it. But if being is all-inclusive, without determinations, it would no longer have any definite meaning. For Heidegger, again, being is to be grasped in its 'becoming', alongside the plurality of its limitations. We are, under a specific compulsion, forced to say "being and…" (Heidegger pp. 71-72). The "and", here,,

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is different from the German *undverbindungen*. It reveals implications in a formal sense; it carries no hue of separation. Rather, the 'scissions' of *being and becoming, being and appearance*, *being and thought*, *being and duty*, reveal to us "an idea of the order which govern their essential connection and the historical sequence in which they have been forged" (Heidegger p 72). Thus, the idea of ontology is not bereft, or even alien, to time. History and ontology go together as objects, from the most abstract mathematical entities to the most concrete objects in cats, have Being in common; "Being", for Heidegger, then, is "that which determines entities as entities" (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 2:25). Glenn Gray states the reversal of roles of Philosophy in Heidegger in contrast to Hegel:

> "Heidegger rejects the Hegelian notion that the history of thought is a phenomenology of spirit in which previous stages are constantly superseded by more adequate, profounder ideas of the real. In fact, he sometimes seems to feel that there is a reverse kind of process, that the history of Western philosophy has been a gradual forgetting of the insights of the earliest thinkers. Original thinking, he writes somewhere, came to an end when philosophy began to be sepa- rated into logic, ethics, physics, etc. The earliest thinkers did not even use the term "philosophy" for thinking. It seems to follow that the pre-Socratics, particularly Anaximander, Parmenides, and Heraclitus, were closer to the truth of Being than Plato, Aristotle, and the moderns" (Gray 418).

## II

The brief reflection that transpired in the previous section was essential to showcase the prevalent ambivalence in ontology. The question, thus, stands: Is there a possibility of overcoming this schism or must "consign to silence" (Wittgenstein 89) in face of choosing one position over another? A synthesis is, apparently, the most promising way to unify, again, the elements that are abstracted due to the partial nature of our intellect. But is it not the case that the synthesis is simply an attempt to arrive at a 'middle-path' to bring two disjunctive forms into a harmless state of equilibrium? Would it not be more prudent, perhaps, to devote our time and efforts to a deeper reflection of the problem? Indeed, it is only by 'thinking through; this problem that we can hope to overcome or undercut the opposition between the two positions of ontology.

Some conclusions can now be drawn regarding the state of contemporary ontology; one of them is that the notion of being (or Being), as we take it now, comes with a long history behind its evolution. The idea of being, indeed, is a *cultural* one, and in its simplicity, one can comprehend the whole history of its origin. We can, and *ought* to, never forget this fact. The second conclusion is an extension of the first; like Kant, we should accept the fact that an idea creates a presupposition of it being true if it possesses a long history of being accepted:

> "Now although the application of this principle has proved very meagre in

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> consequences, and has indeed yielded only propositions that are tautological, and therefore in recent times has retained its place in metaphysics almost by courtesy only, yet, on the other hand, it represents a view which, however empty it may seem to be, has maintained itself over this very long period. It therefore deserves to be investigated in respect of its origin, and we are justified in conjecturing that it has its ground in some rule of the understanding which, as often happens, has only been wrongly interpreted." (Kant 118)

A third conclusion is likely to be thought of as implicit in the above two; the addressal of the problem of being would take the form of three different, although not mutually exclusive, questions if its 'ground' is "some rule of understanding":

1. The question of the origin of being and its meaning for the understanding[6]
2. The question about the fundamental structure of being
3. The question regarding the limits of application to the notion of being that would also define its objectivity

The first question, i.e., the question about the origin and meaning of being, already has in itself two different levels. There is, first, the traditional or the 'analytic' sense of being, the idea of being that belongs to the logical order. However, being's definition as 'the most inclusive' of all concepts is too strictly confined to the realm of logical and extensional space. However, being is not a class or a genus; "'it is not possible for either One or Being to be a genus of thing" (Madigan and Aristoteles 992b22). Being is not foreign to anything and, thus, it does not get its determinations from anything outside of itself. It contains its totality within itself. The principle of contradiction, although founded on being, is not limited to its logical implications. It enters into the mind and imposes itself upon it; Aristotle himself formulates the principle of contradiction in three ways: 1) the ontological (Aristotle and Ross Book VI, 3. 1005b 19-20); the logical (Aristotle and Ross Book VI, 6. 1011b 13-14); and the psychological formulation that says "ἀδύνατον γὰρ ὀντινοῦν ταὐτὸν ὑπολαμβάνειν εἶναι καὶ μὴ εἶναι...—"No one can believe that the same thing can (at the same time) be and not be" (Aristotle and Ross Book VI, 3.1005b 23-24).[7] Thus, our reflection on the idea of being takes us from the realm of the logical to the phenomenological level.

The *phenomenological ontological* is concerned with our structure of consciousness; 'consciousness of something' in the most general sense of the term. Being, in this sense, defines a field, a 'horizon' holding together multiplicity and generalizing it in a whole. This sense of being is not so much distant from the contemporary philosophers to whom we attach the tag of 'analytic' or philosophers of language. Wilfred Sellars, in his prominent essay 'Philosophy and Scientific Image of Man', defines the aim of philosophy in a more or less similar vein of generality:

> "The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things

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> in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term." (Sellars 1)

Being, thus, becomes a formal object; it is a principle of unity that sheds light on the real that allows us to possess an ontological concern with the things as they are (to use a Kantian phrase, things 'in-and-for-themselves'). However, seen from this point of view, the idea of being, notwithstanding its *de jure* universality, becomes a 'regulative principle'. This regulative principle, as Kant rightly says, may seem like something in the external world; but it is derived "not from the constitution of an object, but from the interest of reason." (Kant A666). Being will direct the understanding in some essential, although unverifiable, way:

> "In this regulative capacity it goes far beyond what experience or observation can verify; and though not itself determining anything, yet serves to mark out a path." (Kant A668-B696)

This principle of unification that we call 'being' constructs a *world* out of things along with making our spirit strive in a never-ending discourse. However, this transition from the logical to the phenomenological would not be without a systematic determination; formal ontology would still have the task of distinguishing between the general features that make the a priori conditions for both the things and our knowledge of them. The concept of being must possess an internal structure if it is to serve as a meaningful framework for understanding entities. Since the time of Plato, philosophers have recognized that, to avoid conceptual vagueness and philosophical disarray, the notion of being, however transcendent, must mediate itself through a systematic articulation of determinations. Thus, the necessity of categories arises from this very demand: it is the necessity by which being unfolds itself into a world articulated through a multiplicity of levels and determinations—none of which can be reduced to a single, homogeneous unity.

It is not to yield to the breakdown of being's structure (as Hartmann seemed to do). It simply brings us back to the position that the question being becomes one that operates on many levels. The 'being' of a cup as a cup is different from its being as an object, and both are different from them having being in general. Thus, it should be asked: "if being is analogous to an act, in what sense are we to understand that act? In what way are we to understand its self-determining nature if it is neither a logical space nor a genus?

Now, different answers can be given if the question is framed in this way. The meaning of *the act of being* can be identified as God (as Thomistic thinkers argued) or even an *Élan vital* ("à la Bergson). It is not the task of this paper to provide a judgement as to which of the different answers to the question is the most appropriate. Whatever may be the answer to the question, one thing should become clear to us if we aim to continue to reflect on the question of being: if ontology is to do justice to its pursuit of the idea of being, it cannot remain content with a single answer. Even Quine, a thinker whose approach is both famous and notorious for

 

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its strict analyticity, argues that the line between committing to an ontology that includes atoms and one that includes Santa Claus rests on considerations that may change in the future. A paragraph of him on knowledge can equally be applied to the idea of being:

> "…knowledge develops in a multiplicity of theories, each with its limited utility.... These theories overlap very considerably, in their so-called logical laws and in much else, but that they add up to an integrated and consistent whole is only a worthy ideal and happily not a prerequisite of scientific progress.. . .let the reconciliations proceed; each step advances our understanding of the world.:" (Quine 251)

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have been, in the course of outlining the form of our problematique, able to somewhat foresee the principal structure of ontology. It emerged from a critical reflection on the contemporary situation of ontology and the history of it. We must acknowledge that there exist attitudes lying underneath the contemporary positions in ontology. One of the attitudes, if it is to be pointed out, is called the primacy of attaching meaning. If matter and form are to distinguished, contemporary theories, in virtue of different 'values', tend to attach one of the two meanings to the 'form': it can either be a simple fact of existence or something that allows a thing to exist. However, as analytic philosophers such as Quine, Davidson, and Richard Rorty have shown, meaning is not something that should be thought of as a 'given' to a 'term'. This 'presuppositionlessness' is something that philosophy should incorporate in questions of ontology. Philosophy can ignore it only if it is ready to pay the price of forgetting a duty that is its own in entirety: the task of radical reflection.

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## Endnotes

1. The terms 'derivative' and 'basic' are to be seen as local features of language – an alternate route to study ontology and ontological statements. For a more thorough application of this alternative route, see Cornman, James W. "Language and Ontology." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1963, pp. 291–305. Print.

2. Gilson' *L'être et l'essence* (1962) does a good job in tracing this aspect of Aristotelian thought to its 'destiny' however leaving room for a more exact history of western philosophy. See Gilson, Étienne Henry. *L'être et l'essence*. Paris: J. Vrin, 1962. Print.

3. For a philosopher like St. Thomas Aquinas, this relation between the 'regions' and the 'ground' is intrinsic to being as the form of intellect (see *Summa Contra Gentiles,* II, c. 83).

4. This revival of the age-old questions in Heidegger allows us to recall his 'fundamental thought'. Scattered passages from Heidegger' primary works would suggest the reader how his trajectory of pre-predicative ontology goes; see

 

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Heidegger, Martin. *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*. Translated by Ted Sadler, Continuum, 2002; Heidegger, Martin. *The Principle of Reason*. Translated by Reginald Lilly, Indiana University Press, 1991. Also, see Heidegger, Martin. *On the Way to Language*. Translated by Peter D. Hertz, Harper & Row, 1971.

5. The 'Greek sources' to which Heidegger refers to, namely in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, are sometimes prominent individuals but, other times, nameless people who he sweepingly calls 'the Greeks'. Glenn Most's set of theses against this question is quite important for understanding who exactly becomes Heidegger's primary source of authority. See Most, Glenn W. "Heidegger's Greeks." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2002, pp. 83–98. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20163874. Accessed 5 July 2025.

6. When we use the term 'origin' in this context, we do not mean to attach any temporal designation to the beginning of the idea of being. The term, instead should be thought of as a sufficient reason. This idea, although taken as discarded by most of the thinkers, is generally accepted; we agree with Ralph Walker's statement that "we, like Leibniz, accept not only the methodological requirement to search for sufficient reasons, or best explanations, wherever they can be found; we also share his assumption that when we find them these explanations yield us truth about the world, or approximate truth anyway." (Walker 112)

7. For a more dense and comprehensible analysis of the principle of contradiction in Aristotle, see Lukasiewicz, Jan, and Vernon Wedin. "On the Principle of Contradiction in Aristotle." *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1971, pp. 485–509. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20125812. Accessed 6 July 2025.