ONTOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS: WHETHER THEY ARE ONE

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Abstract:
This investigation discusses the relation between ontology and metaphysics. They are different, but how different? While metaphysics is transcendental and has as purpose the justification of being as existence, it establishes it, too. Metaphysics is speculation (as theoretical approach in the strong meaning of the term) on being. This relation can only emphasize the aporetic quality of metaphysics.

Key words: ontology, metaphysics, existence, being, Dasein, “as if”, philosophical reconstruction.

1. That ontology and metaphysics are not one, there is no need for a demonstration: following the Occamian principle of the “economy” of thought, why should there be two terms with the same meaning? From here on in though, difficulties emerge; since they are distinct, what is one and what the other, what do they have in common, to which extent do they interfere and in which manner they relate to one another?

Etymologically, ontology and metaphysics are close, but individualized enough, so that, elementary, they do not seem one, as in the ulterior developments, following other trajectories and embracing different purposes to distance themselves.

Even though ontology, as a term, was a late invention, apparently coined by Goclenius in 1613, and metaphysics was named, in the beginning, in an “editorial” order, after more than two centuries since its institution by Plato and Aristotle as a different modality of philosophical reconstruction, even without a name or, rather, using un-homologated names, as logic and as system, ontology was a forerunner. Maybe the name given by Parmenides to ontology, “The Path of Persuasion” – peithous...keleuthos was not quite the most suitable; it was not consecrated, either. But there is no doubt that formally, as logic, it was a term of Parmenidean institution. The fragments 2-8, especially the last one, established what we could consider now the very canon of ontology.

Not even philosophia proté, the primary, Aristotelian, philosophy, was meant to enter as such into the language of philosophy. By what it signified it was fundamental in the history of metaphysics. And not only in its history, but also in its system, if whatever is first in a certain order of things is the same way situated in another one (Hegel, The Science of Logic, I, Section I, Ch. 1c).

Thus, in their way, the Greeks still distinguished nominally between ontology and metaphysics. It matters less that neither The Path of Persuasion, nor primary philosophy entered the philosophical language even deeper, as long as they are decisive for the formal distinction and reconstruction. But what is one, and what is the other since there is no metaphysics (and also there is no ontology) similar to geometry, considering this in a similar manner to Kant, because according to various factors (cultural time, philosophical situation, intentionality) the presuppositions are, to a similar extent, different. That is not at all an epistemological default as philosophies in their understanding as hypothetical reconstructions share the same formal foundation, hence their complementary relation. Maybe each philosophy is an attempt within the fictional logic: “as if” (als ob vaihingerian) things might be one way, or another.

As a pair, they are not as much two numerically, as they are a pair by specification, and as such they are measured one through the other. Thus, ontology and metaphysics have the same object of application, only that, according to their situation they reconstruct that object entirely. As a consequence, no matter how varied the re-
significations, they are brought close together by the fact that, within their definition, one presupposes the other.

2. Etymologically, an Aristotelian suggestion even, the metaphysics was about what-is-beyond-physis. If nature "is called physis and if we cannot arrive at the concepts of nature but through experience, then the corresponding science is called metaphysics" (from meta or trans and physika). It is then the science "on what lays beyond the domain of physics" (Kant, Über die Fortschritte der Metaphysik seit Leibniz und Wolf, in Werke, VIII 1969, p.301).

The concept of metaphysics as science "which investigates transphysical realities (a concept spread broadly in the Middle Ages) is based on a particular understanding of the preposition meta" (Aubenque, Aristote et le Lycée, in Histoire de la philosophie, I, 1969, p.649). This understanding indicates also something else, hence not only meta, but also, for what we are discussing here, among, in the middle (of something): Odysseus “drunk and ate among the servants” – meta dmóon pine kai esthe (Odyssey XIV, 140); Gyges “takes seat among his shepherds” – kathéménon meta tòn állon (Plato, The Republic, 359e).

Institution of being in itself (as far as it, something, exists) ontology was (and is) anterior in relation to metaphysics, which is to investigate the mechanisms of the institution. The anteriority is though only logical and not temporal; otherwise it would be as if morphology could exist without syntax.

In its logic ontology is paradoxal as soon as the term of the being-in-itself, tò ón, is contrary to the common opinion (para doxos). Un-comprised (apeiria) and, through cognition, with an un-comprising quality to it – apeiron – if it is one, unlimited, without beginning and without end, it could not have been instituted otherwise than in a paradoxical logic, therefore, in an apophatic manner. As well undetermined and unlimited, one, un-born and un-perishing, simple and indivisible, being was thought of as being for reason; how was it to be explained as existence besides reason? Existence as existentia (from sisto-sistere and ex, that is, to come from, to stay on) could not have been self-sufficient. As a consequence, existence is what it is; only founded on the self. Otherwise, (1) either it is, but as consequence we have two prime terms, with equal ontological dignity (which, following the argument of “the third man” implies a ruinous regression forever and ever), (2) or, in a Cratylean manner, it rather does not exist. Then, neither the things of the world nor we exist. Therefore, with necessity, there is only one prime term and that one, single as it is, is also unlimited, undetermined, simple, etc. This way, tò ón cannot possibly generate (establish) something, neither by transformation, nor by division.

But how to think in non-contradictory terms this passing from one (hen) to the multiple (the Platonic model, henological, or from the unlimited, undetermined and simple to what is limited, determined, composed, corruptible)? Or, in other phrasing how should we think in terms of identity and difference being and existence, both?

In two distinct registers, very similar to the primary Platonism, where “ideas” and things are separated ontologically, how is it possible that “being” is accomplishing to be what is not, and how it is not? Having foundation in what it is and in what can only be, and not sufficient ontologically to itself, results that existence is rather not. Nevertheless, it is.

In a metaphysical exercise, therefore, our mind is to find out how the foundation is and is not the existence and how it is and it is not the being itself. “Metaphysics is the fundamental development in Dasein. It is Dasein itself.”

While thinking as being and thinking existence as not being, but existing, we legitimate both the fact of being (to be) and the fact of not being (not to be, nothingness). Nothingness is described by a metaphysical and not by an ontological concept.

As a consequence, metaphysics, transcendental in the scholastic meaning of the term, had and has as purpose the justification of being as existence, because it establishes it, without that by this fact to devolve from its own logic. In other words, metaphysics is speculation on being (“speculation” has here a similar meaning to thèoria from Greek), present within existence, but neither by division, nor by transformation. How then? This is the eternal question of metaphysics, aporetic by its very own logic.

This aspect ensures its perpetual openness.

References

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