0. Describing and prescribing

The fundamental problem of metaphysics is the classification of what it is. This is already the case in those books in Aristotle’s work placed after his books on physics (meta ta physikà biblia): being is expressed in many ways, but all these ways have a common meaning, one which concerns the properties which transcend specific investigations into entities considered from a given standpoint (mathematics studies being from the viewpoint of quantity, physics from the perspective of nature). That science which investigates being in its entirety is, of course, metaphysics, which Aristotle calls “first philosophy” and in other similar ways. From the sixth book on, (Metaphysics comprises fourteen volumes), having terminated his considerations on introductory issues, Aristotle deals with substance, with potency and with actuality, with the one and the many, and he advances a critique of Plato’s theory of ideas. His classificatory system is based on one fundamental assumption, namely that there are no universals in the world, (they exist only in thought), there are only individuals, composed of matter and form. What is first presented to experience is the last in the order of causes. The starting point of metaphysics is experience, but metaphysics transcends experience, and does so in two directions which are closely interconnected in Aristotelian thought: God as the prime mover, and the first principles of all things. The common feature of what is being classified, however, is a function of being. It is predicated in many ways, and its first manifestation occurs in a sensible and immediate presence. This is the sense in which Aristotle deals with first principles not only in the theological or epistemological domain, but also in the sphere of aesthetics. The basic idea – which is expressed not in Metaphysics but in De anima – is that at an intermediate level between sensibility and intellect, there exists a common sense (koinè aisthesis) capable of capturing certain principles which the individual senses cannot record, but which are crucial to perception: movement, shape, size, number, unity. These principles transcend individuals, but are situated within them. This is what will later be termed the transcendental, which will have a primary role both in history and in ontology.

The alternative between the study of the Highest Entity and that of entities in general follows two tracks in Aristotle’s work, and these two tracks will accompany us throughout our reconstruction. The first theme centres on what can be counted as an entity (or, more directly, what can be counted as an object). Can an entity be classified as an object only of it is within easy reach, and in line with the primary value of “being” in Indo-European languages, which is essentially concerned with what can be known physically? Or with all those entities which have an identity, even if this is merely logical (as with numbers, for instance)?

Next to this alternative -which is an ontological one, in the proper sense of the term-, we find a methodological type of alternative, which indicates two possible approaches to the problem of metaphysics. The first consists in correcting what is being classified, and lies at the heart of the “corrective” or “revisionist” tradition of metaphysics. (The term “prescriptivist” may also be employed, and I suggest this be done since it avoids the censorious overtones of the other two terms.) A prototypical example of this approach is physicalism, which judges phenomena as being either irrelevant or merely apparent. The fundamental aim of this approach is to identify the basic structures of entities. In Ancient times, when physics did not yet exist as a well-developed subject, this approach studied God as the final cause or the efficient cause of the world. The second approach, that of descriptive metaphysics, consists instead of describing experience on the basis of the principles governing it. It may be said, in general, that metaphysics has always been constructed from a combination of these two needs. Pure correction renders metaphysics indistinguishable from physics (the only difference would be that metaphysics is more general and vague; this is the representation of metaphysics offered by Kant and those who adopt his perspective to a greater or
lesser extent). Pure description is impossible (on this count there is full agreement with the hermeneutic position that facts cannot be totally independent of interpretations) and, were this to turn out to be possible, it would be pleonastic, for it would produce mere enumeration and not categorisation. Despite the preceding strictures, the basic thesis I wish to advance, in the light of contemporary issues, is that ontology is essentially descriptive, and that the the programme of a revisionist or prescriptive ontology, (which is common to many esteemed ontologists today) is only another name for epistemology.

1. From metaphysics to ontology.

The period which goes from Aristotle to Descartes may be considered - from the standpoint of the hypothesis I am formulating - as the long period in which ontology was conceived. The period must not be considered simply as a change in name, but, more radically, as the invention of a concept. The basic idea is that the tension between prescriptivism and descriptivism is formalised in the Middle Ages as an alternative between the supreme object of metaphysics (God) and its subject, to be precise the domain in which investigation is carried out, that is to say the entity as an entity. At the end of the sixteenth century, when the uncontested domination of Aristotelian philosophy and its commentators had been left behind, this alternative is formulated as a distinction between special metaphysics (whose object of investigation is God, the soul and the world as specific entities) and general metaphysics (which investigates the nature of entity as such). At the beginning of the seventeenth century, a number of scholars termed the domain of general metaphysics with the name “ontology”.

1.1. The object of metaphysics

I will discuss the subject further by examining the object of metaphysics. Two points must be considered here. The first consists in discovering what is the most appropriate field of investigation for metaphysics. The second consists in establishing what types of objects are relevant to metaphysics.

With regard to the former point, the solution advanced by medieval thinkers who appeal to Aristotelian philosophy is to distinguish the subjectum metaphysicae (that is, its sphere of investigation) from the objects it deals with. From this standpoint, the solution proposed by Avicenna has prevailed: the sphere investigated by metaphysics is not the highest entity, that is theology, but rather the entity qua entity, that is the entity intended at its highest level of generalisation. The reason for this is that if a science has to describe an object instead of demonstrating that it exists, then theology, whose most important commitment is to prove the existence of God, cannot constitute the natural sphere of investigation of metaphysics. The entity qua entity is, in Avicenna’s view, substance, intended in the widest possible sense of the term, that is before the distinction between material substance and immaterial substance is made (seeing that selecting one of these two spheres would actually mean one is already opting for a given ontological domain).

This solution also appears to indicate what counts as an object for classical metaphysics: the object is that which may have properties. Throughout our history, this concept has lain at the roots of the debates concerning the ontological relevance of objects which only possess logical existence. Here, too, one specific case springs immediately to mind. That there is a crucial difference between a physically real entity and a physically unreal entity is an obvious fact, one which leads Thomas Aquinas to draw this very distinction between real entities (possessing an essence and an existence, and which can be organised through categories) and unreal, which only posses an essence (for instance, privations), but concerning which true propositions may be formulated. However, only a real entity may be identified.
The idea that the principal object of metaphysics is a real entity, and that this entity coincides essentially with the material object, (throughout the Middle Ages, for example, God is a very real entity indeed), is very late to develop, and its development is by no means accepted wholeheartedly. This is quite surprising, if one considers that the primary value of “being” in Indo-European languages is physical accessibility. It would thus appear that the distinction between appearance and reality is made early on in the reflections carried out by common sense, just as in reflecting on being, it would seem to be a foregone conclusion that the value of being as a sensible presence may be extended to non-sensible presences. In any case, the first clear formulation of the reduction of an entity to sensible presence may be found – pace Heidegger, who believes that such identification may be traced back to Greek thought – in Kant, who reports his investigation into the object inasmuch as it is a sensible object, determined by aesthetics and studied by physics. The metaphysical transcription of this principle is even later, and goes back to Strawson, who, in the second half of the nineteenth century, underlines the central importance, in metaphysical enquiry, of the real and material object. This concept thus signals the emancipation of metaphysical investigation both from logic and from physics.

Nevertheless, the most important step forward towards the birth of ontology is taken at the end of the seventeenth century by Suárez (Courtine 1990), who defines the object of metaphysics as a real entity, which also includes God, immaterial substances and oaths, but not entities pertaining to reasoning (for instance, empty concepts without an object, such as the word “blitiri”, whose properties cannot be determined, in contrast to concepts such as a wooden metal or a square circle). This real entity constitutes the object of general metaphysics; next to it, there exists a special metaphysics, which isolates certain given ontical domains: rational theology, rational psychology and rational cosmology. The first of these domains, and which is the one that enjoys the highest degree of abstraction and generality, is what was shortly after to be called “ontology”.

1.2. The birth of ontology

The first officially recorded uses of the term “ontology” go back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, in works produced by two authors of philosophical encyclopaedias who worked independently (Goclenius and Lorhard). As lexicographers, these two authors probably codified a use which must, by then, have become common practice. The fact that this baptism occurred during the age of the scientific revolution is by no means of secondary importance: scholars of metaphysics conceived of themselves as commentators on Aristotle’s work, while ontologists hold that they break with the Aristotelian and scholastic tradition in the light of the methodological reorganization of knowledge which characterises a period which witnesses either the radical reform of traditional branches of knowledge, such as logic, physics and mathematics, or the invention of new branches of knowledge, such as semiotics, aesthetics and, of course, ontology.

This stance is openly espoused in the seventeenth century by Walch, whose work almost seems to trace an opposition between metaphysics and ontology. If the former, which in Walch’s opinion originally consisted in the investigation of the natural knowledge of God and His attributes, had gradually been reduced to the simple status of a dictionary, ontology, on the other hand, was, Walch argued, the instrument with which the “new metaphysicians” intended to investigate the entity and its properties. From a historical viewpoint, the fact that Walch makes an obviously false statement is of little importance since, as we have already seen, the investigation of the entity qua entity is already fully part of the project of Aristotelian metaphysics. What really matters is that Walch is fully aware of the fact that ontology is a new development compared to metaphysics, and that it is even in opposition to metaphysics, almost an alternative between modernists and traditionalists. On this count, two issues must be tackled: the first concerns the historical transformations in which the origins of the birth of ontology are to be found; the second concerns the theoretical problem of the relationship between metaphysics and ontology.
With regard to the revolutions under way in the age in which ontology was born, I wish to emphasise three points.

The first is almost as old as Ockham, and this is the break with the idea that there is an analogy between the sensible thing and the suprasensible thing (*analogia entis*); this facilitates differentiating between ontology and theology. The break with the great analogical system which could gather finite and infinite, just as it could gather sensible and non-sensible into one single homogeneous and coherent system, is a distinctive trait of modern philosophy. For Nicholas of Cusa, the world becomes infinite; Descartes underlines the fact that man does not really resemble God at all, because finite and infinite share nothing in common (the only infinite entity in humans is will, and it is precisely an excess of will compared to all other human faculties that Descartes believes is the cause of error); it is on this want of an analogy between what is sensible and what is not that Kant bases his distinction between analytics (which offers truthful propositions) and dialectics (which furnishes hypothetical propositions only and creates space for antinomies). The most significant point for our discussion is that this constitutes the basis which prepares the separation between the sensible world and its physical explanations that characterises modern science and which, as we shall see, constitutes an important argument in favour of the revival of ontology in the nineteenth century.

The second is the break with tradition: as was hinted at earlier, Aristotle’s stance is insufficient, and ontology emerges in this reformed context, characterised by the loss of the unchallenged authority of the Ancients. In one sense, the development of ontology partly as an antagonist of metaphysics is the result of renovation of logic, as this had been proposed by Petrus Ramus in the sixteenth century: a new logic was needed which would be useful not simply for validation but also for research, and so a wealth of resources which had hitherto appeared closed and insurmountable became available for transformations and innovations. Similarly, in this context, ontology identifies the general features of entities and constitutes the guiding light, explicitly or implicitly, of the search after the new science. For instance, when Bacon speaks of the schemes or frameworks which are characteristic of things; or when John Wilkins proposes guidelines for a universal classification of the world; and, again, when the characteristics of an universal feature are uncovered --research intentions and research projects are manifested which are fully compatible with what, in Goclenius or in Clauberg, in Walch or in Alsed, is developed under the title of “ontology”.

The third feature is an even more important reversal – the revolt against the natural attitude stemming from Aristotelian thought that the external world is clear and knowable, while the internal world is difficult to fathom and comprehend. With Descartes, an alternative paradigm gains sway: while the external world is dubious and transcendent, the internal world (the soul, the *cogito*) is absolutely certain. On the one hand, therefore, research tools are required, and ontology appears to be a universal research instrument, so that it does not oppose the new science; on the contrary, it is a means for achieving progress: it is a vehicle for investigating entities *qua* entities, that is of the general frameworks and features of what there is. On the other hand, the direction is reversed when compared to the realistic and Aristotelian approach, thanks to the Cartesian revolution. Given this state of affairs, it will seem quite natural that ontology will first turn to logic (as a measure of immanent certainty) and then to physics (as the scientific basis of the transcendent certainty of the external world), in a process which will last up to the twentieth century, when recovering the natural attitude will mean consciously breaking with epistemology by means of an appeal to common sense, to ordinary language and to a naive form of realism (which is actually a highly sophisticated attitude).

Coming now to the relationship between ontology and metaphysics, the formulation that states that ontology -which coincides with general metaphysics- is supposed to be more abstract than metaphysics (which also comprised a special part, consisting of theology, psychology and cosmology), was generally accepted, and is still held valid today. Characteristically, the occurrence of the term “ontology” in Goclenius is recorded under the entry “abstractio”: ontology, it is claimed,
deals with the identification of the general features of entities, while metaphysics is at a lower level of abstraction, and already touches on more specific and specialised ontic domains. In Alsted, this difference takes the form of a distinction between the common part of metaphysics (which corresponds to ontology) and its own part proper (which corresponds to special metaphysics, that, as we have seen, becomes metaphysics full stop in some scholars). The common-ontological part of metaphysics is entrusted with the investigation of the Transcendentals, that is of the most common features of each entity, independently of the fact whether the entity exists or not. The special part, instead, is entrusted with a study that requires the adoption of the Categories, which only include real entities. In this framework, the question “what exists?” or “what counts as an object?”, which pertains to ontology, is asked prior to carrying out the investigation into the features of real entities.

This framework is still valid today. Prevalently, ontology is at a higher level of abstraction compared to metaphysics, since it questions what exists, whereas the latter concentrates on the ultimate nature of what exists (Varzi 2002, Smith 2003). In line with the characterisation drawn up by Mulligan (2000), metaphysics poses such questions as: Does a god exist? Is a person a substance, and if so, is it a simple or a complex substance? Is time relational? Are we free? Do values depend on us? Are sound and colour independent of us? Are social objects constructed? Does the world depend on the transcendental subject, on language, on society, on theories …? Is a mental state identical to a state of the brain in a “token-token” relationship or in a “type-type” relationship? Do mental powers dominate over physical properties? In contrast, ontology deals with a higher level of abstraction. Hence it sets itself questions of a more general type or more basic in nature, such as: What is being?” What is a substance? What is a whole? What is a relationship? What is dependence? What is causality? What is a property? What is a state? What is identity? What is a type?

The problem with this division is that at this point it is difficult to comprehend the difference between logic and metaphysics. Above all, it is difficult, from this point of view, to really differentiate between metaphysics and ontology, since none of the questions set in the first series may be allowed without also posing the questions set in the second series, and vice-versa. On the contrary, in the sense I would like to suggest, and which is based on a clear separation of ontology from epistemology (Ferraris 2001), metaphysics is at a higher level of abstraction compared to ontology, intended in the strict sense as the formalisation of all those parts of experience which science appears unable to regulate (Lolli 2000). In this stance, ontology is primarily concerned with the phenomenal and the aesthetical. This situation yields the following domains: a formal ontology, a (corrective or prescriptive) metaphysics and a naïve, aesthetic and phenomenal ontology. If, however, this characterisation were to displease, I would have no difficulty in classifying the ontology I am proposing as an aesthetic-ecological form of metaphysics (Ferraris 1997), whose interests are primarily descriptive and applicational.

2. From ontology to epistemology

2.1. From logic to physics

In the first, Cartesian and Leibnizian, version of ontology, the question “what exists” receives a logical reply, and this is so because Cartesian thought gives primacy to the internal world over the external world, and because Leibniz privileges the (non-contradictory) possible over the real. This in itself is sufficient to underline the profound difference between the Aristotelian approach, which lasted up to and throughout the Middle Ages, and the modern approach. Even the outcome of the course of Leibniz’s thought is significant from this standpoint. In actual fact, when, with Kant, logic ceases to be the ultimate criterion of ontology, the choice is not made in favour of a return to naive reality (this, as we have seen, will not take place until the twentieth century), but in the name of physics as the value of the ultimate instance.
In line with the approach described so far, inasmuch as ontology is at a higher level of abstraction compared to metaphysics, ontology is anterior to the decision regarding the fact whether entities are sensibly real or merely thinkable. Typically, in Walch, an entity, in the widest sense of the term, comprises what is thinkable – that is what is real in the strict sense of the term. Nevertheless, the fact that the “real” can only be attributed to entities in a strict sense means, of course, that we are here dealing with special metaphysics properly speaking, but it also indicates an option, one in which existence plays a primary part in ontology, and it indicates as well a pathway to be taken. In actual fact, the passage from Clauberg, the German Cartesian who first wrote an essay on ontology (or, properly speaking, on “ontosophia”) in the mid seventeenth century, to the authors of treatises on ontology and metaphysics following Leibniz’s thought in the first half of the eighteenth century, such as Wolff and Baumgarten, and on to Kant, consists in the progressive reduction in the importance of the purely logical reply to the question “what exists?”. In Clauberg’s interpretation, what exists is everything that can be put into words or thought, including the square circle and wooden metal (which are contradictory); in Wolff’s interpretation, instead, only what is not contradictory exists, even if it does not occur in experience (for instance, a gold mountain); for Kant, finally, there exists, properly speaking, only what is knowable in time and space. In his view, in fact, the real is not (as it was for the school of Leibniz) an ulterior criterion of determination which is to be added to the possible, but the point from which what exists moves, so to speak, and the difference between 100 real thalers and 100 ideal thalers, that is between ontology and logic, is much more important than it was for his predecessors.

### 2.2. Ontology as epistemology

Particularly useful for our purposes is a direct comparison between the metaphysics of Wolff and that of Kant. The former, (within the framework of an explicit and systematic division), identifies ontology with general metaphysics, and includes psychology, cosmology and natural theology in special metaphysics. Regarding the definition of “entity”, this comprises the possible (the non-contradictory) and cannot be reduced to the real. This means that Wolff’s point of departure is logic and his point of arrival is existence, which for him has the value of predicate, that is, it is once again dealt with from the standpoint of logic. Kant, vice-versa, maintains Wolff’s division, in an implicit form, and – in *The Critique of Pure Reason* – deals with ontology in analytics, leaving special metaphysics to the antinomies of dialectics. This is due to the fact that Kant starts not from logic, but from existence, defined as an absolute predicate (the real is not a modification of the possible, but constitutes the condition of the latter’s being), and determined by aesthetics and studied by physics. This explains why transcendental philosophy acquires a categorical apparatus (the two pure forms of intuition and the twelve categories), thereby bringing about the collapse between Transcendents and Categories which the traditional approach had kept distinct (the former, in fact, dealt with entities in general, the latter with real entities). Ontology thus becomes a form of physics at a higher level of abstraction (it concerns first principles regarding investigation into nature).

As I was suggesting earlier, however, Kant’s thesis does not recover naive realism. It merely furnishes a more sophisticated version of Cartesian thought that lies at the roots of modern ontology. As we are certain only of what is immanent in our consciousness, then the correct way to relate to the world is by constructing a system which will provide mathematical-like rules for our experiences, which will then no longer appear dubious and transcendental. But a pathway of this sort already exists, Kant observes, and it is the union of mathematics and experience which is offered by Newton’s physics. Transcendental philosophy, which will play an important role in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, thus appears to be a naturalisation of physics, which is no longer intended as a historically-contingent explanatory method, but rather as the way in which our senses and our intellect work naturally. In this sense, Kant offers a highly influential model of prescriptive metaphysics. What is is only that which exists for physics; the indeterminacy of metaphysics
derives from the fact that concepts fail to refer to intuition, and it becomes important to find pure sensible intuitions which are both certain and attemptable, thereby acting as an object and as a rule for metaphysics which, of course, is carried out in the sense of a form of mathematical physics. However, considering that at the time the difference between physics and the perceptible world was not as great as it is today, Kant could deceive himself into believing he was proposing a form of descriptive metaphysics. The defects of his line of attack may be briefly summed up in three points: first of all, his appeal to the transcendental takes the form of a petition to principle (in truth, if each experience presupposes a transcendental framework, as Kant holds, then what we have is an unfalsifiable principle); secondly, since the measure of what is is given by physics, then metaphysics becomes totally redundant (and Kant recognises this openly, making this the underlying theme of his critical philosophy); thirdly, the claim that he presents a form of descriptive metaphysics fails when it comes face to face with the manifest incapacity of transcendentalism to account for experience.

The first point was already obvious to Bolzano, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Kant can claim the knowledge of objects is filtered transcendentally only because he has employed the term “representation” indiscriminately, to refer to a thought, to a mental image, and to a real thing (which Kant classifies as a phenomenon for consciousness instead of a thing in itself, which he deems is unknowable). It is obvious that at this point, there is no way out of transcendentalism. Indeed, it would suffice to distinguish a representation from its object to realise that transcendentalism is not omnipresent. The second point, regarding the naturalisation of physics and the redundancy of metaphysics, may be rejected by demonstrating that it is brought about by a transcendental fallacy that goes something like this: for Kant (as for Hume), if experience exists, then science exists, whether they be actual or potential. There follows an epistemological inflation, that is, a systematic infiltration of ontology by epistemology, since every relationship we have with the world is reputed to be mediated by conceptual frameworks, since, for Kant, intuitions without concepts are blind; and the world loses all objectivity and autonomous consistency, for no world exists outside conceptual frameworks. The most serious weakness in Kant’s perspective appears nevertheless at the level of description. The experience which Kant talks about bears no resemblance whatsoever to the world as we know it; furthermore, Kant failed to provide any satisfactory description of schematism, that is the way in which conceptual frameworks or schemes may be applied to phenomena, thereby determining them. The Kantian perspective is ecologically insufficient, just as someone who claimed to explain a room and its furnishings by having recourse to the periodic table of the elements.

Despite this, thanks to its economy, (the transcendental explains everything at a low cost, by invoking the activity of conceptual frameworks, that is, by means of an up-dated version of the psychology of the mental faculties, as well as by bolstering its position through appealing to the prestige of physics), transcendentalism has been the dominant philosophy for the last two hundred years, and, in the immediate Kantian inheritance, was developed either as idealism (here philosophy claims to be the founder of science) or as positivism (where its subordination to physics is at least explicitly declared). From this point on, writing the history of ontology coincides with the reconstruction of the attempts at escaping from the magic circle of transcendentalism, either by finding a conceptual apriori which is not constitutive of experience, or by finding a material apriori which does not turn out as being conditioned by a form of transcendental logic. The pathways of ontology develop, therefore, at least in outline, in the search after a form of thought and a world separate from the mind.

3. Conceptual apriori

As we have seen, the collapse of ontology onto epistemology is based on a transcendental fallacy which assumes a fundamental equivalence between science and experience (each experience is nothing but a science, whether actual or potential), which is so obvious as to offer few, and often
fragile, alternatives. This approach met with relatively few objections, partly because of the advantages which it enjoyed and which I illustrated above. Such objections generally came from Catholic circles which manifested a diffidence towards a system which made of the I the proprietor of the universe, and which reduced the complexity and dignity of objects, their specific mode of being, making of them simply a projection of the subject.

A first manifestation of this reaction to transcendentalism is the search for a conceptual apriori which was distinct from physics, and this attempt (which is the most important quantitatively as well as the least determined) may easily accommodate, within its confines, even scholars who do not disdain appealing to Kant or following explicitly in his wake. The first formulation, which was defined by the alternative between the sciences of nature and the moral sciences, seems to be an explicit extension of Kant’s philosophy. Its objective is, quite simply, to reduce the role of physics as the value of ultimate instance, while confirming the principle that according to which thought has constitutive value with respect to experience. The second formulation, which includes the pathway which leads from Bolzano, via Brentano, to Husserl and to Frege, aims, instead, at finding an autonomous dimension for thought, as a separate (psychic and extra-psychic) world which no longer performs the function which transcendental logic had claimed for it – namely giving form to experience.

3.1. Sciences of nature/Moral sciences

The opposition between sciences of nature and moral sciences may be characterised as a weak reaction to transcendentalism, executed mainly by scholars who appeal to Kant or who even go so far as to call themselves neo-Kantians. At the roots of the appeal to the moral sciences lies a legitimate, urgent need, that of accounting for those spheres of experience that cannot be reduced to physics, and which Kant was unable to elucidate. Nevertheless, the transcendentalist framework remains intact (Dilthey explicitly proposes a critique of historic reason to accompany the critique of pure reason), and so the interest in this perspective consists, more than anything else, in indicating a pathway that is not to be followed.

As we shall see at the end of this essay, if the moral sciences have any chance of success, this lies in an appeal to a naive form of realism and to an objectivist sphere which takes up an antagonistic position compared to the domain that was privileged by nineteenth-century theorists. However, this is clearly not the intent of the nineteenth-century theorists of the moral sciences, who deemed the ontological issue (which had to be relocated within the boundaries of physics) was now impoverished, outlining a more modest and backward task for philosophy, which amounted to a theory of knowledge, another point over which there was agreement with the Kantian approach. The immanent fallacy of such an approach consist in taking the ontological problem (what exists for physics exists), as being solved, and in underestimating the difficulties inherent in the gnoseological problem, which is solved yet again in line with the Kantian approach, by adopting the assumption by which every object is such for an investigating subject. It is implicit, at this point, that the object is dependent upon the subject, which in its turn is defined exclusively as a subject which can come to be investigated.

The price to be paid for this type of approach is the impossibility of determining the alleged object of the moral sciences. If such an object is to be identified with the psychic, as Dilthey suggests in his first formulation of the issue, then the moral sciences intertwine with those of nature, since psychology is also a natural science. If the object is to be determined by the method, as suggested by Windelband by pitting natural sciences which recognise generalities against moral sciences, which recognise individualities, it is difficult to see how the moral sciences can avoid depriving themselves de facto of any epistemological content, thereby reducing themselves to a mere collection of individual entities.

3.2. Psychology, logic, phenomenology
A different route to achieving autonomy from transcendental philosophy (intended as the naturalisation of physics) consists in rehabilitating psychology and pure logic, thereby working against their debasement by Kantian philosophy, which had reduced the former to a merely empirical discipline and the latter to a formally complete doctrine, unchanged in its essence since Aristotle, and valid only for the verification of propositions, that is, it had been dispossessed of any objects of its own. The pathway towards the rehabilitation of psychology is trodden by Brentano and by Husserl; that of pure logic by Bolzano and Frege.

Brentano and Husserl maintain the transcendental framework at least inasmuch as they admit the existence of phenomena, but they proceed to detaching psychology (and then phenomenology) from physics. In Brentano, this move is attributable to an open rejection of Kant (who had camouflaged a form of empirical psychology under the name of “transcendental logic”). Brentano takes Descartes seriously: the only certainties we possess are those immanent representations in consciousness; other phenomena are uncertain and transcendent, and our relationship with the world is one of “blind faith”, to the point that on Brentano’s view, external perception is not perception. The price to be paid to obtain certainty is, therefore, the relinquishing of the transcendental (namely the idea that conceptual schemes and frameworks make the world orderly); consciousness does not produce order, bar in its own entity, with the result that the world is curtailed, divided into one sphere which is immanent and certain and another sphere which is transcendental and radically dubious.

More subtly, however, the cost of a real psychology is the relinquishing of any form of ontology. This is what Brentano’s appeal to intentionality amounts to, for in his appeal he returns to scholasticism in the Aristotelian sense of the term which, since it no longer occurs in a realistic context but in a Cartesian context, necessarily constrains a clear division between psychology and ontology: in intellectual knowledge, as in sensible knowledge, the concept or the form of the thing is learnt, never the thing in itself, which remains, as I was saying, dubious and transcendent. However, and for this very reason, Brentano discovers a sphere of immanent psychical phenomena which prove to be amenable to independent physical analysis, since all the physical world is purely hypothetical. At the same time, Brentano opens up a route for the investigation of ideal objects, to which he attributes exactly the same value as real objects, maintaining consistency with his position about the external world.

In many ways, Husserl renders Brentano’s work more rigorous. The appeal to immanence remains; however, if immanence has to be, then it is advantageous to proceed in terms of an apriori foundation (a critique of psychologism in logic, with an attitude akin to Frege). In this Husserl reveals foundational attitudes with regard to those sciences analogous to those of Kant: but his real foundational work is in the world of naive reality, that is, in a sphere of experience which is distinct from science. This framework has bequeathed much to contemporary ontology: formal ontology, tropes, and the appeal to Lebenswelt. This legacy squares the score with the fundamental weaknesses in Husserl’s work, the continued appeal to phenomena and the final call on transcendentalism.

The clearest objection to transcendentalism comes, instead, from Bolzano and from Frege. The interest nurtured by pure logic (which in this sense stands in stark opposition to Kant’s transcendental logic) is in the expulsion of thoughts from the mind, and this means two things: first of all, thought (once subjective representation has been distinguished from objective interpretation and once the latter, in its turn, has been distinguished from the object of representation) is no longer generated by subjectivity, as happened in the final instance in Kant. Secondly, thought, as a conceptual apriori, appears as a sphere of objects, having the same status as physical objects. This stance is the exact opposite of the transcendental stance, where thought is always the product of a subjectivity (which does not change much, even if one calls it transcendental), and it is only a network of conceptual schemes which gives form to things. In Bolzano, this approach – which necessarily involves the rejection of the Copernican revolution and the expulsion of phenomena – is
expressed in the following terms: we cannot determine the limits of our knowledge (the opposite view to Kant’s), but we can develop rigorous metaphysical knowledge, that is, we can know the real in itself. Each utterance has a corresponding proposition in itself, whose existence is independent of the fact that it has been conceived by someone. In this way, logic emancipates itself from psychology, and the foundations are laid for a division between physics and metaphysics, for unlike subjective representations, objective representations are ideals, hence they have nothing whatsoever to do with the physical domain. Although Frege probably had neither direct nor indirect knowledge of Bolzano’s position, nevertheless he develops that position even further. Frege’s point of departure is to distinguish subjective representations from objective thought, and the latter from the object of thought; the specific feature of thought is that it is true (and such truth thus appears as independent both of psychology and of physics).

4. Material apriori

The strong reaction against transcendentalism comes, however, from the appeal to material apriori. The basic idea here is that the world of objects (which are not phenomena for a subject) is governed by laws of its own, and these laws do not necessarily coincide with conceptual frameworks and, at its most extreme, perhaps not even with perceptual apparatus. Rather, they exercise a claim over knowing subjects (for example, I cannot ignore a chair, the chair will uphold its claims and I will fall over it). The ontological issue that remains to be solved is, however, what counts as real, depending on whether one moves from the internal world according to Cartesian thought, or whether one moves from the external world according to Aristotelian thought (and in agreement with common sense).

4.1. Realism

Realism may be defined in many ways, but the sense in which I think we may speak of it here, in an ontological context, seems to be well illustrated by the debate between Meinong and Russell. For the former, the sphere of entities also comprises horses with wings and square circles. These have being (they have properties) even though they do not exist. In the latter’s view, on the contrary, the theory of inexistent objects violates the principle of contradiction.

4.2. Subject/Object

Closely related to the problem of the reality of inexistent objects (that is, of the internal world) is the issue of what point to start off from in ontology, whether to start with the subject (the internal world) or with the object (the external world), whether to start with conceptual schemes, which are presumed to be omnipresent, or with material objects, which have priority over schemes.

Gestalt uncovers a point that had escaped the partisans of conceptual apriori, that is the extreme stability of perception (which coincides with autonomous laws governing the organisation of the external world). This has neither to do with reductionism (quite the contrary, the phenomenal is asserted as being independent of the physical), nor with the claim that the real world is revealed, that is, that the real is reduced to the phenomenally present. This is more like the case of recognising an object which one has encountered but which does not answer to conceptual schemes – and which lies at the roots of the notion of “unamendableness” which I will develop further below. This coincides with the search after autonomous laws governing the way the world of perception is organised.

In relation to Gestalt psychology, Hartman’s and Scheler’s realist ontologies constitute a step forward. As psychologists, Gestaltists confined themselves to recognising that perceptual structures were independent of conceptual frameworks (which was the most damaging legacy left by the Kantians, and the reason for ontology having transited into epistemology, since the best
conceptual schemes are those furnished by science). Here, instead, we have a further step: to leave aside all epochs, to relate to the world as if it were a structure which it would be meaningless to have hyperbolic doubts about or to postulate transcendences. This is the ultimate sense of realism: the world (whose existence is unquestionable) has its laws, and imposes respect of these laws; it is thus expedient to leave the initiative to the object. The break with transcendentalism is crystal clear. For Hartmann, it is a question of capturing being independently of the act of knowing. By asserting that the object of knowledge exists independently of the knowing subject, Hartmann sums up a pathway which was essentially trodden by Rickert and his devotee Lask, focusing on the object instead of on the subject (which is what Heidegger does, instead). This may also be seen in the definition of a stratified reality in which the foundational moves are made from below and not from above.

At the opposite pole, that of subjectivism, the fundamental characteristics of Heidegger’s ontology may be easily secured, by taking the opposite, from those of Hartmann’s ontology. Foundation begins with the subject (Dasein) instead of with the object; ontology appears as a superscience which is antithetical and fundamental compared to positive sciences, while for Hartmann, every science is by its very nature ontological. Furthermore, ontology is not the warehouse where we deposit things without a history, but it manifests itself as intimately historical (this move comes about progressively in Heidegger, also thanks to the influence of Nietzsche); and the intervention of historicism opens up the way to the introduction of language and – something which Heidegger failed to notice – to the introduction of science. In sum, transcendental idealism is proposed anew (with openly antiscientific overtones): a doctrine of science which, however, does not wish to found science, but to penetrate reality in greater depth.

5. The linguistic turn

Transcendentalism, however, is still a long way off from being put out to pasture. The linguistic turn which invests philosophy for the better part of the twentieth century appears in the first instance to resolve the issue between conceptual apriori and material apriori through its recourse to language, which appears to be both ideal and real, and also as something which belongs both to the internal world and to the external world. In the ontological approach mediated by language, two major options emerge which we outlined at the beginning of this essay: prescriptive metaphysics and descriptive metaphysics.

5.1. Prescriptive metaphysics

In this version, which might even not be declared as being metaphysical but may on the contrary declare itself as constituting a radically antimetaphysical solution, language must come face to face basically with the conceptual frameworks of physics. This position gains sway in the first half of the twentieth century, but it still numbers followers and adepti at the end of the century, often openly invoking the possibility of a metaphysics.

Prescriptive metaphysics may exist even without metaphysics or ontology being explicitly declared as themes (as actually happens in the logical empiricism of the Thirties). Subsequently, prescriptive metaphysics appears to be more willing, compared to the descriptive branch, to adopt a linguistic paradigm indiscriminately, since one of the tacit or explicit presuppositions of correction is that it is carried out on a scientific basis, that is by availing itself of conceptual and linguistic frameworks.

The price this option pays is reductionism, the loss of a large number of the salient features of experience and, as I have already stated, the redundancy of metaphysics compared to physics. It also has a defect: relativism. A battle takes place between conceptual frameworks, in which theories are confronted only with theories, and never with the external world; this, in essence, is the position represented by Quine, and then radicalised by his disciples, starting from Davidson.
5.2. Descriptive metaphysics

Although it does so within the limits imposed by the linguistic turn, descriptive metaphysics follows the realist option. Nevertheless, the costs imposed by the linguistic upheaval create a basic dependence, at the teleological level, compared to epistemology. Language, in actual fact, is the element by means of which concepts are developed, and a concept is that entity that lends itself to amendableness which, it may be reasonably stated, is the task of science, that is, in the final instance, the task of the conceptual frameworks of physics as the basic science.

Thus, the theorists of ordinary language (Austin amongst the analyticals and Gadamaer amongst the hermenenuiticians), fall under the objection of the history and of the epistemology which are immanent to language. Things go differently for Strawson, who clearly states that there are entire parts of our experience which are not subject to history, and by this he means that it is precisely these experiences (hence those non-linguistic and non-scientific experiences) which constitute the subject matter of the form of descriptive metaphysics he proposes.

The risk run by this school of thought is conservatism, if not arrogance and ingenuousness: it is by no means a foregone conclusion that traditional forms of experience can aspire to having the last word, seeing that they generally only constitute the starting point; in addition, the claim that they describe the simple structure of our thought concerning the world may easily induce one to confuse the peculiar preferences of one philosopher with shared structures; finally, as a very first approximation, it is impossible to recognise a stratum of experience which is in no way affected by scientific cognitions, otherwise one would be obliged to admit that the broken stick in the water does not appear broken, though it is (in actual fact, the distinction between being and appearing is part of even our most elementary knowledge of our experience). In other terms, if prescriptive metaphysics appears relativistic, descriptive metaphysics runs the risk of dogmatism.

6. The return of ontology

The return of ontology onto the contemporary philosophical scene is based on three fundamental elements: the linguistic turn has run its course; the hypothesis concerning the omnipresence of conceptual frameworks (and, related to this, the debate on non-conceptual contents) has collapsed; and above all, the full realisation of the division between the world and explanations of the world. (This latter circumstance, which is decisive, appears to be the one which is least noted).

As for the issue analytics-continentals, the irony which lies at the roots of the return of metaphysics consists of the fact that many writers who return in this resurgence of metaphysics belong to the continental tradition, or at least to phenomenology, but they have never been given adequate attention, in this role, precisely by continental philosophers. Cogent testimony of this fact is provided by names such as Brentano, Husserl, Reinach and Meinong.

The specific way this revival takes place is that of a descriptive ontology much more than that of a corrective metaphysics. Stated differently, what Mulligan (2000) suggests is very true (“ontology can be fundamental, but only if it is formal”), but this does not mean that a prescriptive metaphysics (that is, an epistemologically committed metaphysics) prevails. The evidence supporting this second tendency, such as quantum metaphysics or the four-dimensional proposals in the theory of objects, seem to have had less success than the two more fruitful camps, namely ontology as naive physics and applied ontology (both of which are openly descriptive). This is not a fortuitous circumstance. Rather it is inherent to the specific features characterising the contemporary return of ontology. The basic thesis I wish to advance is that ontology must be descriptive, while a prescriptive form of ontology would simply be another name for epistemology.

It remains to ask oneself, first of all, if the return of ontology in the framework of analytical philosophy cannot be seen (at least on the basis of those descriptions which view analytical
philosophy as constituting essentially a philosophy of the linguistic turn) as a widening of analytical philosophy or as the triumph over or a break with the conceptual framework of analytical philosophy. Secondly, it is difficult to support, contemporaneously, a form of descriptive metaphysics and a form of prescriptive metaphysics driven by a theory of meaning. Meaning is concept-oriented, concepts are amendable, hence descriptiveness is only temporary, and moves teleologically into a revisionist sphere. Thirdly, the thesis that reasoning is determined by language postulates, in the final analysis, an experiment which is impossible. Fourthly, one highly possible experiment is to show that vision is independent of thought (in line with the analyses carried out by the perceptologist Gaetano Kanizsa). The debate on non-conceptual contents rests precisely on this consideration: characteristically, Dummett argues that Evans oversteps the confines of analytical philosophy from a variety of standpoints, and the game of the return to ontology is played out exactly on this point, and on its specific determination in relation to naive physics.

6.1 Naive physics

The interest in naive physics arises directly out of descriptive metaphysics, especially because of its appeal to those parts of experience untouched by history. Furthermore (in the perspective I am advancing) the following must be taken into consideration: first of all, history is connected to epistemology, hence there is an ontological element in the rejection of history; secondly, the role of language is reduced compared to the role it plays in descriptive metaphysics; finally, we have a historical contingency, the separation of the world from the explanations of that world which derives from the separation of physics from the phenomenal world.

The world of life is recognised in its true features, features which cannot be reduced to the conceptual frameworks of expert physics. De facto, two versions are involved, a positive version (which postulates basic equivalence between ontology and naive physics) and a negative version, which employs naive physics to indicate a reality which is immune to the truth of science. The process I am suggesting is in three stages: from language (which is amendable) to perception (which is unamendable) to the object (as a real object which the senses can come to know, and not as a phenomenon).

The appeal to the world of life as positivity cannot be proved just as the appeal to language as the ultimate instance cannot be validated; in both cases we are dealing with a point of departure and with an instantiation of judgement, not with an indisputable truth.

It is in this sense that I suggest naive physics be taken as a negative criterion, as unamendableness which encounters and resists the action of conceptual schemes and their capacity to alter. What I propose for this route (and in general for the sphere of naive physics and non-linguistic descriptive metaphysics) is the only way to recover tradition in a non-regressive sense (which is what happens, instead, when tradition is included in the scientific sphere). The ultimate telos, here, is purely theoretical, and consists in outlining the criteria determining the autonomy of the world with respect to our conceptual frameworks and our perceptual apparatus. This constitutes, as I have been arguing, the break with transcendentalism.

6.2. Applied ontology

Tackling the subject from a practical point of view enables us to open up the possibility of constructing a hermeneutical circle taking the object as our starting point. This hermeneutic circle is capable of recognising the objectivities in the world which the conceptual frameworks of physics are unable to recognise.

It is a question of trying, as much as is possible, to found the social sciences on this basis, instead of on the properties of subjects, which, inasmuch as they are subjects, seem to wander aimlessly through space, if they are not anchored to ecologically-qualified objects (many things go through my mind, but I continue to see colours, as did the Greeks). The object is not given as
unknowable and protected by the armour plating of conceptual schemes. The issue is one of underlining the difference between seeing and thinking which I referred to briefly earlier, in which the non-omnipresence of conceptual frameworks may be demonstrated. It is also a question of underscoring a convergence in the ecological context: no matter how different conceptual frameworks, sizes, sense organs might be, I share a world with a squirrel (and I share that world even more so with people who have schemes and notions which differ from mine); in this way, we have available to us, at the very least, a common ground, which is not independent of science and of its transformations.

The idea is one of the reification of the world of life: let us carry out the experiment of attributing as many qualities as possible to objects. It is only when the object no longer suffices that the subject pops out, together with any responsibilities the subject may have. It is no difficult matter to understand that applied ontology, in the terms I suggest, is connected to naive physics and more extensively with the assumptions of descriptive metaphysics. In particular, I would like to suggest, as my conclusion, three distinctive traits that lie at the roots of description and application in ontology.

The world is full of things that do not change. This is the deep meaning of Strawson’s argument in favour of descriptive metaphysics, which offers a remedy to the weaknesses of the philosophy of ordinary language: true, there are inadequate words; true, language is full of confused expressions and of things that are neither in heaven nor on earth, such as witches, for example. Nevertheless, this weakness exhibited by language (which has a privileged relationship, albeit not an exclusive one, with truth) does not affect things, starting with the parts of the human body and their size, things which define the foundations of our relationship with the world.

The world is full of medium-sized things, neither too big, nor too small. Feet, hands, arms are initially the preferred instruments of measurement. Even when we come to speak of the speed of light, of cosmic or microscopic distances, we continue to have things which are handy, places which are at three hundred feet, etc.

The world is full of things that cannot be corrected. In this sense, if we try to recognise the ultimate motivation of the notion of “invariance” which Nozick (2001) identified as the foundation for the notion of “object”, we will realise that things do not change, deep down, because they cannot be corrected, and this, in its turn, constitutes the motivation behind the three most superficial criteria identified by Nozick (independence from subjectivity, multiple access, intersubjectivity). With one advantage, which is far from unimportant to my way of seeing things: invariance, as such, could still be a criterion which depends on the three superficial principles; instead, unamendableness furnishes an autonomous criterion.

Essential references

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