

A NEW REALISTIC SPIRIT: THE ANALYTICAL AND THE EXISTENTIAL APPROACHES TO ONTOLOGY

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Abstract. I shall distinguish between two periods of analytic ontology, one semi-idealistic, the other post-idealistic. The former fostered the very idea of a conceptual scheme within which questions of ontology could be formulated and answered in the first place; the latter rejected this idea in favour of the view that ontological inquiry neither presupposes a framework, nor provides the framework for science or everyday speech. Since then, ontology is what it always have been, the systematic study of the most fundamental categories of being, not of thought. Unfortunately, such a category theory becomes aporetic in its search for a solution of the problem of the ‘temporary intrinsics’ (D. Lewis). Experience cannot tell us, whether entities persist by ‘perduring’ or by ‘enduring.’ One can take an alternative route and seek to broaden the conceptual basis of ontology by focussing on ‘Being’ (*Sein*) in contrast to entities, or being (*Seiendes*). The controversy on perdurantism and endurantism emerges as a dispute over two conflicting ways of being in time, not of Being itself.

I. THE AFTERMATH OF IDEALISM

In the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant distinguishes between two types of idealism and two types of realism. The *transcendental* Idealist embraces the idea that the ‘objects’ which constitute the judgeable content of experience are not things in themselves but our representations of things, whereas the *transcendental* Realist advances the idea that the content of our judgements does include things in themselves. The *empirical* Idealist harbours the conviction that the only objects our minds can be acquainted with are sense data or appearances, whereas the *empirical* Realist

naively assumes that the things we perceive are things in time and space. Another important difference is that the transcendental Idealist posits the subjectivity of space and time, whereas the transcendental Realist views them as “determinations given for themselves or conditions of objects as things in themselves”.¹ In opposition to the transcendental Idealist, the transcendental Realist is ready to abandon the idea of a ‘noumenal object’ as the unrecognizable counterpart to the ‘phenomenal object’, not because she rejects the very idea of a thing-in-itself, but rather because she declares the phenomenal object, apart from rare cases of sensual deficiencies, *to be* the thing in itself. Paradoxically, transcendental Realism leads directly to empirical Idealism, whereas transcendental Idealism turns out to be compatible with empirical Realism. Thus, the empirical Idealist is in no better situation than the sceptic, who also disbelieves that the senses can provide her with reliable information about the external world, unless its very existence can first be proven. The transcendental Realist is committed to the truth of following three propositions:

1. The world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects.
2. There is exactly one true and complete description of ‘the way the world is’.
3. Truth is a relation of correspondence between words or ‘thought-signs’ and external things or sets of them (Putnam 1981, 49).

Propositions 1-3 express a view, which Hilary Putnam has labelled ‘metaphysical realism’. Amazingly enough, transcendental Realism is equally compatible with the following convictions:

4. The question, “What entities does the world consist of?”, is answerable solely within a theory or a description.
5. There is more than one ‘true’ theory or description of the world.
6. Truth should be understood epistemically as ‘idealised rational acceptability’ or the like (Putnam, 1981, 49).

Propositions 4-6 form the essence of a doctrine Putnam labelled “internal Realism”. The *internal* Realist shares with Kant’s transcendental Realist the *realistic* assumption that the judgeable content either of experiences or our scientific theories is true of real, mind-independent objects, not of

¹ *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1st edition, A 369.

sense data or appearances. On the one hand, the internal Realist, like the transcendental Realist, can dispense with the notion of a 'noumenal object' as opposed to the notion of a 'phenomenal object'. On the other hand, the internal Realist does not share the empirical Idealist's conviction that human minds encounter inner representations rather than outer things. However, the internal Realist shares with Kant's transcendental Idealist the conviction that experiences are indeterminate with respect to the content of the judgements they support, unless they interact with 'pure concepts of the mind' (Kant), or a 'conceptual scheme' (Quine). Like the transcendental Idealist, the internal Realist believes that our theories and commonsensical beliefs are empirically underdetermined and, what amounts to the same thing, transcendently overdetermined with a priori categories or concepts.

It is supposedly on account of propositions 5 and 6 that most analytical philosophers in the past shied away from underwriting any doctrine close to internal Realism. Nevertheless, proposition 4 could be accepted without further ado by Carnap, Quine, and their philosophical heirs. Everyone who holds that questions like 'what entities does the world consist of?' lack an answer unless they are 'framed' by a language, theory, or conceptual scheme, is in one way or other still under the influence of idealistic thinking even where she proclaims to be a Realist. A nice example is the radical translator in Quine's *Word and Object*, who is able to discover easily that the natives are uttering the one-word-sentence 'Gavagai' mostly in the presence of rabbits. The empirical evidence, however, supports more than one hypothesis about the right translation of the utterance 'Gavagai'. 'Gavagai' could refer to whole rabbits (particulars), undetached parts of rabbits, phases or time slices of rabbits, or rabbithood (the universal) (Quine 1960, 51). To fix the reference of 'Gavagai' the translator has to be familiar with the 'conceptual scheme', or the 'devices of reference' the native speaker uses. According to Quine, the unscrutability of reference does not present a problem as long as it is restricted to radical translation. The lesson that can be drawn from the thought experiment of radical translation concerns more generally the "empirical slack in our own beliefs" (Quine 1960, 78).

Quine provides a technical device, which nicely makes explicit the ontological commitments of a theory provided that we transform its sentences into the 'canonical' notation of first order quantifier logic. The set of objects a scientist is willing to accept as real is represented by the range of values of the bound variables of the analysed sentences of his theories. "To be is to be the value of a variable" (Quine 1980, 15). The procedure alone cannot settle the dispute on what there really is. In fact, this

question is answerable in the context of our greater explanatory strategies and our preference for a certain style of explanation. According to Quine, we are well advised when we choose our conceptual scheme with the aim to “accommodate science in the broadest sense” (Quine 1980, 17). He expects that “we adopt, at least insofar as we are reasonable, the simplest conceptual scheme into which the disordered fragments of raw experience can be fitted and arranged” (Quine 1980, 16). In other words, Quine speaks in recommendation of a system of physics. The acceptance of a certain ontology boils down to our acceptance of physical theory as the primary tool in our quest for prediction and explanation. But does Quine seriously believe that physics tells us what there really is? At this point of the argument he withdraws from ontological commitments and recommends a new strategy, ‘semantic ascent’, that is, the shift from talk of objects to the talk of words. So called ‘questions of ontology’ are misconceived if they are interpreted as “questions about extralinguistic reality”. Properly speaking, they are questions of how we “most conveniently fashion our ‘linguistic framework’” (Quine 1960, 271). This remark is reminiscent of Carnap’s famous distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ questions as regards existence. Internal questions can be raised and answered within a theory, or frame, whereas external questions are about the frame, which is to say, that they cannot be likened to internal questions (Carnap 1970, 206). They are, as Quine puts it, “pragmatic questions of language policy” (Quine 1960, 271).

Are things different with respect to the other hero of the first period of analytic ontology, Peter Strawson, whose book *Individuals* from 1959 marks for many commentators the breakthrough for serious study of metaphysical questions? Strawson sees metaphysics as the discipline, which strives to “lay bare the most general features of our conceptual structure” (Strawson 1959, 9) and to reveal which categories of entities “in our conceptual scheme *as it is*” should be regarded as fundamental (Strawson 1959, 11). The existence of two competing approaches, or styles of doing metaphysics, ‘descriptive’ and ‘revisionary’ metaphysics, does not affect the discipline’s primary preoccupation with our structure of thought, the former being “content to describe the actual structure of thought”, the latter seeking to produce “a better structure” (Strawson 1959, 9). It is highly questionable, however, whether we should call a discipline which defines itself as an instrument of conceptual change, and of reconstruction of our actual categories and concepts respectively, ‘metaphysics’? In its more traditional mode, metaphysics viewed itself as the systematic study of the fundamental structures of reality, not of thought. Strawson

admittedly succeeded in demonstrating that among the different categories of particulars, material bodies and persons play a fundamental role. Bodies and persons are fundamental in *our* conceptual scheme *as it is*. But is our conceptual scheme, under a less parochial and more global perspective, the only possible one?

II. THE POST-IDEALISTIC VARIANT OF ANALYTIC ONTOLOGY

The beginning of the second phase of analytic ontology is marked by a move, through which the very idea of a conceptual scheme looses its grip on our understanding of reality. According to the older conception of a conceptual scheme which is pertinent to thinkers like Quine and Strawson, reality itself is relative to a scheme. Conceptual schemes are, as Davidson puts it, “ways of organizing experience”, “systems of categories that give form to the data of sensations”, “points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene” (Davidson 2001, 183). Davidson, in a famous argument, proves this very conception of a conceptual scheme guilty of an untenable dualism of scheme and content which he denounces, alluding to Quine’s critique of the two dogmas of empiricism, as its “third dogma” (Davidson 2001, 189). The untenability of the dualism in question is related to the obscure idea of an uninterpreted reality, “something outside all schemes and science”, which is reminiscent of the Kantian concept of a thing in itself, unknowable to the human mind (Davidson 2001, 198). However, the abandonment of the dualism of ‘thing in itself’ and ‘thing for us’ brings the abandonment of the quasi-transcendental concept of a conceptual scheme in its wake. In other words, the very idea of a conceptual scheme is stripped of its metaphysical significance as soon as we have given up the related idea of uninterpreted content, of something waiting to be organized by some organizing system.

Philosophers following this move are not obliged to deny that theories, like languages, provide a frame within which experiences are conceptualized and investigations carried out, nor do they deny that speaking a language implies, in some sense, being responsive to a conceptual scheme. They happily admit that theories, and languages respectively, are replete with ‘ontology’, or that they commit their users to accepting an ‘ontology’. What they deny is that the inquiry into the ontological commitments of a special science, or into the over-all scheme of science, or into a discursive practice of common sense, is the sort of inquiry the metaphysician is interested in. Typical questions metaphysicians these days are wont to pose are, ‘is the

whole more than an aggregate, or a mereological sum, of its parts?’, ‘are events more fundamental than substances, or is the opposite true?’, ‘are properties universals?’, ‘are particulars like numbers, concepts, propositions real entities?’, ‘is time real?’, ‘have persisting objects temporal parts?’, etc. Even if metaphysicians are inclined to answer these questions with a side glance at science, or common sense, what they are after is nothing less than the fundamental categories of reality, not the categories of a particular conceptual scheme. The aforementioned questions are typical questions of some sort of *category theory* that lies at the heart of the discipline from Aristotle on, provided that one understands categories as “categories of being” rather than as “categories of thought” (Lowe 2006a, 5).

Next to category theory, the quest for ontological reduction has occupied many excellent minds in the field of analytic ontology. Normally, metaphysicians make every possible effort to show that some categories of being, or entities, are more fundamental than other related categories. Metaphysicians with a tendency to physicalism have argued in a similar vein that some kinds of properties should be expected to be more fundamental than other related kinds. A property is conceived as fundamental if it can serve as the basis of reduction or, if reduction is beyond the reach, as the basis of supervenience of a property, which is not fundamental in this sense and therefore needs a ‘realization’ by its base. Ontological reduction or supervenience are supposed to solve the problem of theory-reduction – how the special sciences are related to basic physics – and the classical mind-body-problem.²

The ongoing controversy over ‘perdurantism’ and ‘endurantism’ as explanatory models of diachronic identity and change is quite apt to illustrate the new vigour, and realistic spirit, in which ontological issues are now tackled. Formerly, ontologists would have understood the question whether spatiotemporal things like animals, artefacts, and persons persist in time by ‘perduring’ or ‘enduring’ as a pragmatic question of language policy concerning competing conceptual schemes or frameworks, rather than a question about extralinguistic reality. Since the publication of David Lewis’ *On the plurality of Worlds* (1986), the view that ordinary physical objects have temporal parts, analogous to their spatial parts, is called “perdurantism”. The competing view that three-dimensional objects have no temporal parts but are wholly present at each moment they exist is named

² A lucid account of the differences between reductive and non-reductive physicalism and the related notions of ‘identity’ and ‘supervenience’ can be found in Kim 1998, chapter 1.

“endurantism” by Lewis.³ Both views, perdurantism and endurantism, are elements of radically divergent pictures of what is real and what is going on when something comes into existence or passes out of existence, or when it undergoes a change in time. According to the perdurantist, what we perceive as a thing or an object at a particular moment of time is not the whole object, but its temporal part, time slice, or stage, which means that ‘objects’ are best conceived as mereological sums, or aggregates, of points in space-time, or if you like, space-time worms or tunnels. According to the endurantist, substances simply persist through time, which enables them to be the substratum of change. The dispute over perdurantism and endurantism not only reveals incompatible views of fundamental categories of entities, it gives rise to antagonistic theories of time as well. Perdurantists usually embrace an *eternalist* view of time according to which all past and future moments of time are no less real than the present moment. Time is a dimension of reality on par with the three dimensions of space. One strange corollary of eternalism is that objects exist *timelessly* in space-time. On the other hand, most endurantists emphatically deny that objects have temporal parts in the way they have spatial parts, so that talk of ‘timeless existence’ is rather strange to their ears. Since endurantists allow for the possibility of radical existence change – things come into existence and pass out of existence – they are forced into the view that only the present moment is real, a view which is nowadays called ‘presentism’.

As already mentioned above, ontologists of the older days would have discussed the controversy over perdurantism and endurantism, and eternalism and presentism respectively, under the label of ‘competing’ conceptual schemes or frameworks. Quine, in his 1960 *Word and Object*, can be seen as the precursor of perdurantist metaphysics despite his more modest claim to recommend four-dimensionalism as the framework for science. As soon as we drop the tenses and begin to handle temporal information like spatial information, we can see that objects are not distinguished from events, or more accurately, processes. ‘Object’ is everything which fills a previously fixed interval of space-time: “Each [object] comprises simply the content, however heterogeneous, of some portion of space-time, however disconnected and gerrymandered” (Quine 1960, 171). I am free to construct an object consisting of me on August 27th, a time-slice

³ Lewis 1986, 202 became almost canonical: “[S]omething *persists* iff, somehow or other, it exists at various times; this is the neutral world. Something *perdures* iff it persists by having different temporal parts, or stages, at different times, though no part of it is wholly present at more than one time; whereas it *endures* iff it persists by being wholly present at more than one time.”

of Buckingham palace on the day after, and the distribution of the ashes of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull in the Northern hemisphere on April 15th 2010. What distinguishes material substances from objects in this rather liberal sense is that in the case of substances “there are relatively few atoms that lie partly in it (temporally) and partly outside” (Quine 1960, 171). Quine was never quite explicit about the consequences of his recommendations. However, it is one thing to conform our talk of objects to the requirements of physics, and another thing to adopt the ‘ontology’ of current physical theory as canonical metaphysics.

Analytic ontologists of the second, post-idealistic era are metaphysical realists in the sense of Putnam’s definition, that is to say, they are ready to underwrite the postulate of the “one true and complete description of the ‘way the world is’” without much hesitation (Putnam 1981, 49). In this sense ontology has regained its traditional role and reputation, as the “systematic study of the most fundamental structure of reality” (Lowe 1998, 2).

III. THE MODAL TRUTHS OF ONTOLOGY

In the following paragraphs I want to give a brief sketch of how the contemporary British ontologist J.E. Lowe defines the status and role of ontology as a rational enterprise in contrast to science. He confidently presumes that it is possible to achieve reasonable answers to questions concerning the basic structure of reality. However, it is quite unlikely that questions of this fundamental kind can be competently addressed by any special science, or by science as a whole, so that there is a real demand for some sort of a priori reasoning. On the other hand, an a priori discipline like metaphysics cannot claim to tell us, on its own, what is real. The way out of this predicament is to say that metaphysics is primarily concerned with *possibility*, whereas experience tells us which possibility is the actual one. The crucial point for Lowe is that “although what is actual must for that very reason be possible, experience alone cannot determine what is actual, in the absence of a metaphysical determination of the possible” (Lowe 1998, 9). Metaphysics is possible as an independent form of rational human inquiry because possibility is an indispensable determinant of actuality. A natural objection is that the only sort of possibility the empirical sciences presupposes is *logical* possibility, that is to say, compliance with the a priori laws of logic. Empiricists of several epochs have urged that the only precondition which need to be met by the sentences of a theory,

before they are tested by experience, is that they should not entail a logical contradiction. To this Lowe replies that, in the first place, the data of our senses can only be assessed in the light of what is metaphysically possible and, in the second, metaphysical possibility is not tantamount to mere logical possibility. It is not reducible to conceptual possibility or linguistic meaning, either. Metaphysical possibility, of course, must be representable by a proposition but is not identical to the possibility of a proposition or set of propositions. It is rather connected with the possibility of a *state of affairs*, and is therefore a ‘real’ or *de re* possibility. The notion of a state of affairs is taken from a family of metaphysical notions. Related notions are ‘object’, ‘property’, ‘relation’, ‘substance’, ‘kind’, ‘instantiation’, ‘identity’, ‘existence’, etc. Some of these notions are definable in terms of others, and precisely how they should be defined is the issue of a vivid debate.

Nevertheless, Lowe does not contend that metaphysical reasoning is conducted in a purely a priori style, in spite of its modal claims. The reason is that metaphysics, by its own methods, cannot determine which one of the possibilities it states is the actual one. The judgment that the world actually exhibits a given metaphysical feature, say, the existence of substances or of space-time-worms, will be an a posteriori judgment that is responsive to experience. The modal content of metaphysical propositions – that they express a genuine metaphysical possibility – does not preempt their epistemological status as a posteriori.

Knowing how the world *could* be in respect of its fundamental structure, we must judge as best we can how it *is* by determining how well our experience can be accommodated with this or that alternative metaphysical possibility as regards that structure (Lowe 1998, 23).

At this point of the argument a possible objector could interpose that metaphysical theorizing is not much different from scientific theorizing after all. She could contend that propositions in metaphysics differ from propositions in physics by their generality rather than by their content. To this objection, a follower of Lowe can reply that the content of a metaphysical judgment is *modal* whereas its truth is *a posteriori*, which is to say that the methods of its proof must not be disconnected from the evidence of experience. Since the publication of Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity* we have gotten accustomed to the idea that at least some truths are metaphysically necessary and yet knowable only a posteriori. Kripke rose to fame by tearing apart the triangle of necessity, apriority, and analyticity (Kripke 1972). Keeping that in mind, the following picture of metaphysics comes to light. In the first place, metaphysics is a viable

a priori discipline that deals in real possibilities, that is, possibilities of ‘things in themselves’. Secondly, which possibilities are actual cannot be determined by a priori reasoning alone but has to be decided by appeal to experience. Thirdly, the a posteriori character of truth in metaphysics implies that its judgments are open to error and revision. Metaphysics is not the sort of discipline which provides unalterable and absolutely certain insights into the ultimate structure of reality. The question remains, as Lowe puts it, “as to precisely how [...] experience may enable us to advance from a judgement of metaphysical possibility to a claim that such a possibility is actualized” (Lowe 1998, 25).

IV. A NEW ANTINOMY

How can empirical considerations interact with a priori arguments to justify a claim about actuality, say, that time and change are real, or that enduring substances exist? It is quite unlikely that a uniform method, or algorithm, is within reach. Each case must be assessed by its own merits or weaknesses. Let us have a fresh look at the controversy over perdurantism and endurantism and related questions, as they were already broached in the section next to last. David Lewis’ claim that perdurantism – the view that objects persist by having temporal parts – must be true is motivated by the argument that the opposing view, endurantism, owes us an explanation of how things can undergo a change with regard to their intrinsic properties. Lewis sees only two possibilities, either we relativize properties to times, in which case we arrive at new kinds of properties, namely relational, or we relativize objects to times, in which case we get new kinds of objects, time-slices or temporal stages of objects as we know them.⁴ For example an object *O*, say a metallic rod, has at t_1 the property of being straight, and at t_2 the property of being bent. Lewis contends that the endurantist, in order to avoid the blatant contradiction that *O* is straight *and* bent, is forced into the view that being straight and being bent are, contrary to all appearances, not intrinsic but relational properties. The endurantist would have to say, in order to banish the contradiction, that *O* is straight-at- t_1 *and* bent-at- t_2 at the cost of inventing a new variety of properties, time-relative properties. To Lewis’ taste, the better alternative is to allow for temporal parts, or stages,

⁴ Lewis 1986, 202ff. A third possibility discussed by Lewis is that the only intrinsic properties a thing has are those it has at the present moment. All other times are “ersatz other times”, i.e. “representations composed out of the materials of the present” (p. 204).

of O, and to say that O-at- t_1 is straight and O-at- t_2 is bent. This is what the perdurantist proposes. A third alternative, which Lowe brought into play, is, to Lewis' mind, not worth considering because it conflicts with four-dimensionalism and eternalism respectively. Lowe's suggestion has been that the attribution of intrinsic properties should be qualified by a temporal index. Rather than to say that O *simpliciter* is straight, or *simpliciter* is bent, is it adequate to say that O is-at- t_1 straight, and O is-at- t_2 bent (Lowe 1988, 73). This is what the endurantist proposes.

Lowe's use of tensed language in order to resolve the problem of the 'temporary intrinsics' (Haslanger 1989, 119) is adamantly resisted by adherents of the tenseless view of time. The latter hold that expressions such as 'past', 'present', 'future', 'now' as well as temporal inflections of verbs, e.g., the tensed 'was', 'is' and 'will be' are one and all irrelevant to ontology, whereas the partisans of tensed language acknowledge that the expressions in question are well suited to single out instantiations of changing intrinsic properties and changing substances (Smart 2008, 226). Adherents of the tenseless view of time are, by the majority, four-dimensionalists and eternalists respectively, and they side with the perdurantist solution to the problem of the temporary intrinsics, whereas the admirers of tenses are mostly presentists as well as three-dimensionalists, in whose worldview endurantism smoothly fits in. To give a rough outline, eternalists hold that all past, present and future moments of time are equally real, whereas presentists hold that, strictly speaking, only the present moment is real. Since eternalists drop the use of tenses, they are forced to contend, for instance, that all human persons who ever lived, live, or will live, co-exist, though sometimes at some distance to each other. In the same way as a fellow contemporary of mine who lives in Australia, or on Mars, *simpliciter* exists while occupying a faraway region of space-time, my great-grandmother who passed away 70 years ago *simpliciter* exists while occupying another region of space-time. Distant times are like distant continents.

Let us now portray the absurdities of perdurantism, when it comes to describing the contingencies of human existence. As soon as a human person P comes into being she occupies a location not just in space but strictly speaking in space-time, since time and space are but different aspects of unitary space-time. P spreads into all four dimensions of space-time. Strictly speaking, there never was, is, or will be, a single entity, or substance called P, but the mereological sum, or aggregate, of numerous temporal stages, or time-slices, of P which are adjacent to each other, thereby exhibiting strong similarity to each other, and being causally related to each other in some relevant sense. Since we are supposed to drop the tenses, we

cannot truthfully say, for instance, that P did not come into existence before t_1 and shall not pass out of existence after t_2 . We who are living now are in a sense still unborn, and in a sense already dead. Instead of viewing birth (conception) and death as forms of radical existence-change, perdurantists are happy to see them as a variety of qualitative change. With regard to the beginning of life the perdurantist might say: When a human person comes into existence some matter changes from being arranged non-human-wise at one time to being arranged human-wise at some other time.⁵ The same goes for death: Some matter changes from being arranged human-wise at one time to being arranged non-human-wise at another time.

A natural objection would be that this austere picture of reality is incomplete because of its disregard for the kind of facts, which open up from within the perspective that is specifically ours. Notwithstanding their embodiment, human persons are most eminently subjects of experience, or selves, which do not just occur as entities among other entities. They are, speaking ontologically, distinguished by the fact, as Heidegger puts it, that “in [their] very being that being is an issue for [them]”,⁶ not in a theoretical, or instrumental sense, but existentially, which is to say, that they have to project themselves into their future possibilities, including their “ownmost possibility”, death (Heidegger 1962, 294 [250]). Subjects, or selves, cannot dispense with tenses, and other indexical devices, whenever they seek a true and authentic self-understanding, which reveals that their very existence is, at bottom, temporal. As long as we count subjects, or selves, to be among the fundamental categories of being – which, of course, can be debated – we come to believe that reality itself changes in respect to its content as time passes, not in the idealistic sense that the world gains or loses a centre when a single subject comes into or passes out of existence, but in the realistic sense that the decisions and projections of each individual being have an impact on the whole fabric of being.

A cool-headed metaphysician who believes in science as “the measure of all things” (Sellars 1997, 83) can hold that the phenomenology of human existence simply does not count as the right sort of evidence when it comes to adjudicating which one of the rival possibilities, perdurantism or endurantism, eternalism or presentism, four-dimensionalism or three-dimensionalism, actually obtains. She can, in particular, contend that the use of tenses and other indexical devices renders our world-descriptions

⁵ Cf. Rea 2003, 259. Rea speaks of horses.

⁶ Heidegger 1962, 32 [12]. The bracketed numbers refer to the German edition of *Sein und Zeit*.

too ‘anthropocentric’ and ‘parochial’ so that they lack objectivity. As Smart puts it, “[t]he desire for a non-parochial and non-anthropocentric view of the universe provides reasons for liking a tenseless view of time” (Smart 2008, 227). However, even a philosopher who does not buy into existential ontology can retort that the ‘tenseless’ view of time and its related metaphysics, perdurantism and eternalism, are in danger of turning time into something unreal. Someone like Lowe, who considers our talk about time and times to be “an abstraction from talk about changing things” (Lowe 2009, 73), cannot admit that the tensed – time-indexed – use of predicates, among them ‘exists’, does not single out real changing properties and real changing things. In his opinion the passage of time consists precisely in the fact that real change takes place – that reality *itself* changes in respect to its content (cf. Lowe 2006b, 285). Among the varieties of change such as substantial, qualitative, relational, and compositional change, only substantial change is qualified to shed light on the nature of time. Lowe defines ‘substantial change’ as “*existence-change* – coming into and passing out of existence in an absolute sense” (Lowe 2009, 73). He takes the notion of ‘passing out of existence’ quite literally, “as involving an *absolute* ceasing to be, rather than merely the occupancy of another and earlier temporal ‘location’” (Lowe 2009, 72). In his opinion, to deny that substantial change does take place is, in effect, to deny that time is real, and therewith all change. While the *passage* of time presupposes that at least one single substance undergoes an existence change, the *unity* of time requires that for any two adjacent moments of time at least one substance must persist across it. Since composite substances cannot persist unless some of its parts do, the unity of time presupposes the persistence of overlapping simple substances. “[I]t is the persistence of simple substances that underpins the unity of time” (Lowe 2009, 77). At this point of the argument Lowe asks the question what we should say if it turned out that persons or selves were the only candidates for simple substances. The obvious implication would be that the passage and unity of time depends on the existence of beings like ourselves, “*minded beings*” (Lowe 2009, 81). This suggestion has the awkward consequence that time was not real until the dawn of conscious life in the course of evolution, a suggestion that blatantly contradicts the findings of modern science. One way out of the predicament would be to posit the existence of a minded Being that existed since the very beginning of time itself. Whereas the unity of time depends upon the existence of one everlasting unchanging substance, the passage of time depends upon the mutable natures of less permanent substances, whether these be conscious or unconscious ones (Lowe 2009, 81).

V. THE APORIA OF CATEGORY THEORY

The previous discussion has left us with two conflicting metaphysical pictures. On the one hand, according to the ‘tensed view’ of time, the use of tenses and other indexical expressions is well suited to single out real changing things and real changing properties. Not only properties and relations, but also substances are real and can undergo real change, which is to say that they come into and pass out of existence. Many things are spatially extended, but strictly speaking not one single thing is temporally extended unless we want to assimilate things to processes. Time is real as substantial change takes place everywhere in the universe from its very beginning. On the other hand, according to the ‘tenseless view’ of time, we can do away with tenses and other indexical devices when it comes to describing real things and real properties because such items have their being independently of time. Things are temporally extended as they are spatially extended, since time is just one dimension of unitary space-time on par with the other three dimensions. Change is possible not in the way that substances persist while change takes place with respect to their properties, but rather in the way that things have temporal parts, which slightly differ in their properties.

The temporality of being is among the most basic assumptions of the metaphysical picture which is connected to the ‘tensed view’ of time. It is only with respect to the other – ‘tenseless’ – view of time that all things exist timelessly, strictly speaking. Since we, as subjects or selves, are beings that are ontologically distinguished by the fact that we entertain a relationship towards our being – a relationship which is existential rather than theoretical or instrumental – we cannot help but understand our own mode of being as temporal. Consequently, the metaphysics related to the first view, endurantism, receives strong support from the perspective, which is emphatically ours, whereas the metaphysics connected to the latter view, perdurantism, receives even greater support from special relativity. Endurantism and perdurantism are metaphysical possibilities of equal merit, so that the question of their truth cannot be determined in a purely a priori manner. As soon as it comes to adjudicating how well our experience can be accommodated with endurantism or perdurantism, our discussion ends in stalemate. It is not a question whether experience can be our final arbiter. The question turns, however, on whose experience ought to count as evidence – the joys and sorrows of human ‘deciders,’ who have to anticipate their future possibilities, or the measurements of detached ‘observers,’ like those who discovered, for instance, that the speed of light

is the same for all inertial observers regardless of the state of motion of the source, with the rather counter-intuitive consequence that the simultaneity of any two events cannot be determined independently of some inertial frame of reference. Special relativity supports four-dimensionalism, and in its wake the ‘tenseless’ view of time and perdurantism.

With this awkward result in mind one might put the blame either on the *a posteriori* part of the whole enterprise – that human experience is unable to resolve the question which possibility is the actual one – or on its *a priori* part – and thereby conclude that the partisans of both sides have chosen the wrong categories when it comes to delineating metaphysical possibility in the first place. Both, endurantists and perdurantists, agree that the primary category of ontology must be the most general of all, namely “entity or being” (Lowe 2006a, 7). They merely disagree on the question which entities, or beings, are the most fundamental ones, say, individual substances, properties, tropes, events, or processes. Someone who is influenced by the Heideggerian approach to ontology – like the author of this paper – cannot help thinking that the narrow basis of category theory is to blame for the predicament the previous discussion has left us with. In the next section, I want to give a brief sketch of early Heidegger’s attempt to broaden the categorial basis of ontology by focussing on ‘Being’ (*Sein*) in contrast to entities, or being (*Seiendes*). Since the paradigm case of ‘Being’ is the Being of that entity (*Seiendes*), for whom its Being “is an issue for it” (Heidegger 1962, 32 [12]), the notion of Being is intimately tied to human subjectivity and its existential modes of self-projection and care as “being-alongside” entities, which it encounters in an antecedently disclosed world (Heidegger 1962, 237 [192]). The temporality of Being is a natural assumption of the existential approach to ontology that can be held only at the cost of a total revision of our most basic concepts in ontology.

VI. THE EXISTENTIAL APPROACH TO ONTOLOGY

In *Time and Being* (1927) Martin Heidegger carried out his famous attempt to overcome the central paradigm of Post-Cartesian mentalistic philosophy (*Bewusstseinsphilosophie*) – the subject-object scheme – and to work out an alternative to Husserlian *phenomenology*, which still adhered to this paradigm by choosing a more radical starting point for his investigation. This attempt led him away from transcendental subjectivity to the core of the analysis of disclosedness (*Erschlossenheit*) of a ‘world’. The overcoming of the subject-object scheme (S-O scheme) was to proceed in two steps:

firstly, it had to be shown that the S-O scheme, although not false, was too restricted a model of our relationship towards entities, since it was tailor-made for epistemology not for ontology. Accomplishing this task required, secondly, a radicalization of the whole enquiry, which was tantamount to a change of subject from epistemology to ontology. It was crucial to recognize that *knowing* was no freestanding relationship towards entities, but a variant of *understanding* which revealed itself as a mode of *Being* (*Seinsweise*) of that entity, for which Being was an issue. The principal focus of the phenomenological research shifted away from the givenness of objects towards the phenomenon of an antecedently disclosed world, in which entities could be discovered in the first place. The phenomenon of disclosedness was not bare of its own presupposition – it was rooted in the disclosedness of an entity that was endowed with an understanding of its Being, a Being which included Being in a world – an entity called ‘Dasein’.

The entity which is essentially constituted by Being-in the-world is itself in every case its ‘there’. [...] This entity, together with the Being-there of the world, is ‘there’ [‘da’] for itself. [...] *Dasein is its disclosedness.*⁷

The shift from entities to Being necessitated a reform of phenomenological method. Since Being was not an entity, our encounter with objects could not serve as a paradigm case from which Dasein’s understanding of Being could be easily extracted or read off. Moreover, Dasein was special by the fact that it understood itself in its Being, and that it did so explicitly to some degree. Dasein in the quest for understanding was already in possession of understanding of its Being. This circularity mirrored the constellation, in which all genuine, not only existential, hermeneutics operated. The hermeneutical transformation of phenomenology in *Being and Time* boiled down to the replacement of the model of sensory perception by the model of philological interpretation as paradigm of Dasein’s relationship to entities (cf. Lafont 1994). The main task of hermeneutic phenomenology was to lay bare the “fore-structure”, in which all genuine interpretation was operating, the *hermeneutic circle*: “Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted” (Heidegger 1962, 194 [152]). The primary subject of interpretation, however, was no text or piece of literature, but Dasein’s understanding of Being pertaining both to understanding of something like a ‘world’ and to understanding the Being of those entities, which become accessible

⁷ Heidegger 1962, 171 [133].

within the world. The fulfilment of this task required the abandonment of the model of detached observers vis-à-vis a totality of things or objects in favour of the model of involved interpreters or speakers in the midst of a text-like world with its symbolic fore-structure. As a natural consequence, Heidegger also had to abandon the idea of language-free access to reality through the testimony of the senses. This step indeed was taken two years before *Being and Time* was published, in the Marburg lectures during the summer term 1925:

[We have to acknowledge] that our most primitive perceptions and states are already *expressed* ones, even more, in a certain way *interpreted* ones. Rather than primarily and primordially viewing objects and things we are primarily speaking about them, more precisely, we are not expressing what we are seeing, quite the reverse we are seeing what one speaks about the thing. It is this characteristic determinateness of the world and its possible perception and apprehension in virtue of its explicitness, its Being-spoken-and-spoken-through, which has to be taken into view with regard to the question of the structure of categorial apperception.⁸

The term ‘categorial apperception’ (*kategoriale Anschauung*) alludes to Husserl’s idea of a non-sensory perception as a central tool within phenomenological research. Heidegger bluntly denies that any human perception possesses the quality of primordially. The very content of perceptions, as far as humans are concerned, is never ‘pure’ but rather ‘saturated’ with meaning that is derived from an antecedent holistic understanding of the world, in which the observer lives and acts. We cannot hope to answer the aforementioned ‘question of the structure of categorial apperception’ until we have elucidated the holistic structure of this ‘characteristic determinateness’ of a world. It is the core of the analysis of the disclosedness of a world in *Being and Time* which meets this desideratum. At the same time the connection of world and language that began to emerge in the Marburg lecture from 1925 is severed again.

⁸ Heidegger 1979, 75 (transl. H. Watzka): “[Wir müssen anerkennen, dass] unsere schlichtesten Wahrnehmungen und Verfassungen schon *ausgedrückte*, mehr noch, in bestimmter Weise *interpretierte* sind. Wir sehen nicht so sehr primär und ursprünglich die Gegenstände und Dinge, sondern zunächst sprechen wir darüber, genauer sprechen wir nicht das aus, was wir sehen, sondern umgekehrt, wir sehen, was man über die Sache spricht. Diese eigentümliche Bestimmtheit der Welt und ihre mögliche Auffassung und Erfassung durch die Ausdrücklichkeit, durch das Schon-gesprochen-und-durchgesprochen-sein, ist es, die nun bei der Frage nach der Struktur der kategorialen Anschauung grundsätzlich in den Blick gebracht werden muß.”

Most philosophers in the past and in the present take it for granted that the meaning of Being (*Sinn von Sein*) is exhausted by the meaning of those very general categories, which form the proper part of ontology – that Being is tantamount to categorial Being. It is Heidegger’s merit to have overcome this one-dimensional understanding of Being in favour of a multilayered concept of Being that covers both categorial and transcategorial – transcendental – aspects of Being. We have to treat in a nuanced way differences in the meaning of Being (Heidegger 1962, 121 [88]): (1) the Being of entities “within-the-world”, which we “proximally encounter” and make use of as “equipment” (*Zeug*) (Heidegger 1961, 97 [68]); (2) the Being of entities which we “come across” and which can be discovered “in their own right”, if we leave aside our involvement with them; (3) the Being of that ontic condition, which makes it possible that entities within the world can be discovered in the first place, that is, the ontic condition of Dasein. Only the first two concepts of Being are *categories* that pertain to entities, whose Being is not of the kind Dasein exhibits. The first category, “readiness-to-hand” (*Zuhandenheit*), is the kind of Being characteristic of those entities, which are proximally discovered within the world and which are the objects of our everyday dealings (Heidegger 1962, 98 [69]). The second category, “presence-at-hand” (*Vorhandenheit*), is the kind of Being of an entity that merely occurs, being cut off from its everyday usability and serviceability, its ‘readiness-to-hand’, and freed for unprejudiced observation and research. Heidegger happily admits that nothing ready-to-hand can be “there” unless something present-at-hand exists. From this truism it does not follow that the category of readiness-to-hand is ontologically founded upon the category of presence-to-hand. Quite the reverse is true, “[r]eadiness-to hand is the way in which entities as they are ‘in themselves’ are defined ontologically and categorically” (Heidegger 1962, 101 [71]). The argument in favour of the ontological primacy of readiness-to-hand over presence-at-hand runs as follows: knowing, as a way of determining the nature of something present-at-hand by observing it, is possible because Dasein’s primary mode of involvement with things is not one of disinterested curiosity, but one of practical concern (*Besorgen*), afflicted with a characteristic “deficiency”: “Being-in-the-world, as concern, is *fascinated (benommen)* by the world with which it is concerned” (Heidegger 1962, 88 [61]). Knowing is freed when concern *holds back* from any manipulation and utilization and puts itself into the remaining mode of Being-in-the-world, which opens the possibility that entities can be encountered purely in the way they appear to us. The relation of knowing, however, is unable to disclose entities in their own way, since

knowing is no free-floating behaviour of a human cognizer, but a mode of Being that is embedded in Being-in-the-world. “[K]nowing is grounded beforehand in a Being-already-alongside-the-world, which is essentially constitutive of Dasein’s Being” (Heidegger 1962, 88 [61]).

The third aspect of Being, the “worldhood of the world” (Heidegger 1962, 121 [88]), is not related to an entity whose Being can be subsumed under one of the previously discussed categories – ‘readiness-to-hand’ and ‘presence-to-hand’ – but to an entity whose Being is special, since it includes understanding of its own Being that is, at the same time, understanding of something like a world and understanding of the Being of those entities, which can be encountered within the world. ‘Worldhood’, being intimately related to Being-in-the-world not to things within the world, does not count as a category, but as an “*existentiale*” (*Existenzial*), that is, as a specific mode of Being of that entity, for which Being is an issue (Heidegger 1962, 92 [64]). At the same time, Dasein’s worldhood has the function of a transcendental condition of objecthood. The ontic condition for the possibility of discovering entities within the world is not a system of law-like causal relations, but a “totality of involvements” (*Bewandtnisganzheit*) fixing in advance with regard to each single ready-to-hand entity (*Zuhandenes*) what involvement Dasein has with it (*welche Bewandtnis es mit ihm hat*), because Dasein’s very Being consists in its “involvement” (Heidegger 1962, 116 [84]). The totality of involvements goes back to a “towards which” (*Wozu*), in which there is *no* further involvement, no further usability-for and serviceability-for. This primary ‘towards which’ is a “for-the-sake-of-which” (*Worum-willen*) pertaining to the Being of an entity for which, in its very Being, that Being is essentially an issue, and whose Being is defined as Being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962, 116 [84]). The disclosedness of the world has its ontic ground in the Being of an entity which is “cleared” (*gelichtet*) in itself, not through any other entity, in such a way that “it is itself the clearing” (*Lichtung*) (Heidegger 1962, 171 [133]).

According to Heidegger, the fruitfulness of the discipline called ‘ontology’ hinges on the proper understanding of ‘Being’. To be sure, Being always is the Being of an entity, but not all Being is tantamount to categorial Being. In history, it was divine Being that fell into the proper domain of *transcategorial* Being.⁹ When Heidegger concentrates on the transcategorial aspects of Being he certainly has in mind not the Being of the

⁹ E.g., in God is no substancehood, no distinction between potentiality and actuality, matter and form.

‘groundless ground of all Being’, but the existence of human agents whose Being is distinguished by the fact that they entertain a special relationship towards Being, including their own Being, and the Being of something like a world. That Being-in-the-world transcends all categorical Being is owed to the fact that the fundamental categories of Being, ‘readiness-to-hand’ and ‘presence-at-hand’, are conceptually dependent on the very understanding of Being Dasein already possesses. The proper task of ontology is to lay bare the fore-structure, in which Dasein’s understanding of itself, its involvement with things and others, and a world in its entirety operates. The structure of Being-in-the-world plays a constitutive role with regard to the structure of the content of experience Dasein can have in its encounter with the world. In that sense, the fundamental meaning of ‘Being’ is not categorical but rather transcendental. It would be a mistake, however, to ascribe to Heidegger the restoration of Kant’s transcendental idealism dressed up as new. He simply wants to remind us of the fact “that Being can never be explained by entities but is already that which is ‘transcendental’ for every entity” (Heidegger 1962, 251 [208]).

The temporality of Being is a natural consequence of the existential interpretation of Being. The fundamental modes of Being can be characterised, without going into much detail, by the triad “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*), “projection” (*Entwurf*), and “care” (*Sorge*) (cf. Heidegger 1962, 264 [222]). Dasein is ‘thrown’ into its possibilities, it is already in a definitive world, alongside a definite range of entities. On the other hand, it has to project itself into its future possibilities, it has to live authentically and to make choices on its own. Dasein’s Being-in-the-world is essentially ‘care’, defined as “Being-ahead-of-itself” (*Sich-vorweg-sein*) and as “Being-alongside” (*Sein-bei*) entities encountered within the world (Heidegger 1962, 237 [192]). As care, Dasein is not totally absorbed by worldly things, it is rather “*ahead of itself*” (*ihm selbst vorweg*) as self-projecting Being towards its future possibilities. Since Dasein has already compared itself with a possibility of itself, it is *free* for its “ownmost potentiality-for-Being” (*eigenstes Seinkönnen*) (Heidegger 1962, 236 [191]). Existentially speaking, Dasein’s uttermost and ownmost possibility is death. “Being-towards-death” (*Sein zum Tode*) makes it possible that Dasein, as Dasein, can be *whole* and *authentic* (Heidegger 1962, 303 [259]). Anticipating its own death, Dasein can come “towards itself” in its ownmost possibility, that is, it can “put up” with this possibility as a possibility in “letting it come towards itself” (*Sich-auf-sich-zu-kommenlassen*). This “coming” [‘Kunft’] in which Dasein, in its ownmost possibility, comes towards itself, is the primordial phenomenon of *future* (*Zukunft*) (Heidegger 1962,

372f [325]). Anticipation of its own death makes Dasein *authentically* futural. Dasein, as coming towards itself, is essentially *futural* in its Being. Among the three “ecstases” (*Ekstasen*) of temporality – future, present, past – only future possesses the character of primordially. “Primordial and authentic temporality temporalizes itself in terms of the authentic future [...]” (Heidegger 1962, 378 [329]). It is Being itself, and not merely entities – as ‘entities in time’ – which is temporal by its very nature. Accordingly, ‘temporal’ can no longer mean ‘being in time’. Temporality is an intrinsic feature of Being itself (cf. Heidegger 1962, 40 [18f]).

To be sure, it is existential Being rather than categorial Being which is viewed as intrinsically temporal – a Being which is at the same time Being-in-the-world and Being-alongside things within a world. The aforementioned dispute as to whether entities persist by having temporal parts at different times, or by being wholly present at more than one time, comes out as dispute over two conflicting ways of being in time, not of Being itself. The conflict does not affect our authentic self-understanding.

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