

# METAPHYSICS: A TRADITIONAL MAINSTAY OF PHILOSOPHY IN NEED OF RADICAL RETHINKING

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## CONTENTS

<b>0 Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 “Metaphysics” Today: Misconceived or Misinterpreted.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2 Metaphysics in the Primordial Sense and the Question of Being.....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Disambiguating metaphysics .....	6
2.2 Traditional ontology’s failure to thematize Being .....	11
2.3 Analytic metaphysics and the non-thematization of the dimension of Being .....	13
2.4 Heidegger’s restating of the question of Being.....	17
<b>3 Concluding Remarks .....</b>	<b>19</b>

## 0 Introduction

Increasingly many contemporary philosophers accept metaphysics as essential to philosophy, and address metaphysical issues. This is a significant and welcome development, but it raises the pressing question of what, exactly, “metaphysics” is taken to be. Is there a definition or at least a general characterization of metaphysics that does justice to the long, important, but also chaotic history of inquiry that has had this designation? It appears to me that, at least in analytic philosophy, there is not. Instead, most analytic philosophers proceed on the usually tacit assumption that the only way to distinguish metaphysics from other areas of philosophical inquiry is to do the following two things: first, to introduce a purely extensional definition of the term “metaphysics,” so that metaphysics becomes the set of all philosophical approaches, past and present, to which this term has been applied; and second, to embrace one of those approaches, rejecting or ignoring all the others. This I deem clearly inadequate, chiefly because it situates all members of the set of approaches on the same level, the level at which the focus is on beings (with a small “b”) or entities. As I will argue in this lecture, however,

philosophy – and indeed metaphysics – requires theories not only of beings but also, on a deeper (indeed, on the deepest) level, theories of Being (with a capital “B”). Thomas Aquinas explicitly includes Being within the subject matter of metaphysics, but post-Aquinian metaphysicians make no such specific inclusions. Indeed, not until Heidegger is the thematization of Being again explicitly tackled – but Heidegger, as is well known, denies that his “thinking” is metaphysical. Clearly, Heidegger falls prey to self-misunderstanding, since he explicitly undertakes “a transformational recovering of the essence of metaphysics”, adding: “... in this transformational recovering, the enduring truth of the metaphysics that has seemingly been rejected returns explicitly as the now appropriated essence of metaphysics.”<sup>1</sup> The radical rethinking of metaphysics I advocate centrally involves including Being within the subject matter of *metaphysical* inquiry, to be sure on the basis of a theoretical framework that totally dissociates itself from Heidegger’s understanding and practising of “thinking”, as will be shown later in this lecture.

The lecture is divided into three parts. The first characterizes the complex status of metaphysics at present, arguing that metaphysics requires rethinking because it is currently misconceived (by most analytic philosophers) or misinterpreted (by many continental philosophers). The second part shows what becomes of metaphysics if the current misconceptions and misinterpretations are avoided; most centrally, metaphysics then becomes – once again! – an inquiry within whose scope is Being. The third part presents some concluding remarks.<sup>2</sup>

## 1 “Metaphysics” Today: Misconceived or Misinterpreted

A striking phenomenon in contemporary philosophy is that the most radical critics – not to say enemies – of *traditional* metaphysics are no longer the traditionally best-known critics, especially Kant (to some extent), the empiricists, the logical positivists, and the pragmatists. Instead, these critics may be divided into those who do

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<sup>1</sup> M. Heidegger, *Pathmarks*. Edited by William McNeill (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1998), 314–315.

<sup>2</sup> Some aspects of the topic of this lecture are treated in more detail in the author’s contribution to the volume: Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen (ed.), *Metaphysics: 5 Questions* (Automatic Press/VIP 2010), chapter 10, 91–102.

not say what they mean by “metaphysics,” instead relying tacitly on misconceptions— that is, they call their inquiries “metaphysical,” but their “metaphysical” domain is far narrower than is the domain of traditional metaphysics—and those who do say what they mean, but in doing so misinterpret—that is, they reject what they call “metaphysics,” but the “metaphysics” they reject is not traditional metaphysics, at least not in its entirety. Most analytic philosophers are in the first group, whereas at least a significant number of continental philosophers are in the second. I turn now to concrete descriptions of the approaches taken by members of these groups.

[1] I begin with those critics of metaphysics who tacitly truncate the domain of metaphysical inquiry—thus, with the approach taken by most analytic philosophers. Adequately characterizing this approach requires a brief consideration of the history of metaphysics. As is well known, although the first book with “metaphysics” in its title is by Aristotle, Aristotle himself never used this term. In book Γ of the book that was titled *Metaphysics* only long after his death, Aristotle writes, “There is a science which investigates being as being (*to on he on*) and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature.”<sup>3</sup> This sentence is the primary source of the metaphysical tradition.

Until the beginning of modernity, Aristotle’s metaphysical conception—which is not systematically structured—was treated only in commentaries; Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus were the most important commentators. Systematic structure was not brought to metaphysics until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Francisco Suarez provided such a structure (although, as I show below, one that is incomplete). His structure influenced modern philosophy more strongly than did any of the writings of his predecessors. Central to that structure—which remained dominant for several centuries and to an extent remains so even today—is its distinction between general metaphysics (*metaphysica generalis*) and special metaphysics (*metaphysica specialis*). General metaphysics, or ontology, deals with the properties (attributes, predicates) common or relevant to all beings (*entia, Seiende*), whereas special metaphysics treats three specific (kinds or realms of) beings (*entia, Seiende*) within its three subdisciplines: cosmology considers the universe (the cosmos) and its non-human beings, (rational) psychology the human mind or soul, and natural (or rational) theology the supreme being, i.e., God. In part through the mediation of Christian Wolff and Alexander Baumgarten, who

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<sup>3</sup> *Metaphysics* Γ, 1003a21 (translated by W. Ross).

adopted it fully intact in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this structuration of metaphysics has powerfully influenced many philosophers, including, most importantly, Kant and Heidegger.

Analytic metaphysics departs from Suarez's structuration in that it deals almost exclusively with topics belonging to special metaphysics. This is easily confirmed by a brief look into the subject matters treated in today's extensive literature on metaphysics (Introductions to Metaphysics, Companions to Metaphysics, (Systematic) Expositions of Metaphysics etc.). Some other topics are added that traditionally either were not treated within the framework of special metaphysics or were not treated at all. In addition, Leibniz's famous question, "Why is there anything rather than nothing?", is addressed by some, although it remains marginal.<sup>4</sup> But, as I will show in part 2 of this lecture, the responses given to this question are worse than deficient in that they do not respond to the real question.

[2] I turn now from analytic to continental philosophy, or, in the terms I introduced earlier, from those who tacitly misconceive to those who explicitly misinterpret. Here, the situation is significantly different and highly complex. In the wake of Kant, the German Idealists transformed metaphysics to so great an extent that the term "metaphysics" came to be used almost exclusively in accounts of historical authors and writings. The main reason for this was the turn, also taken by the Neo-Kantians and the early phenomenologists, from the dimension of being to the dimension of the subject (mind, spirit). This turn was completely reversed by Heidegger's brilliant recognition of the need to address the question of Being. In addressing that question himself, he not only tried to overcome the philosophy of subjectivity characteristic of modernity, explicitly attempting to transform phenomenology, but also embarked on a massive reinterpretation and critique of the entire "metaphysical" tradition that had developed directly from Aristotle's statement, quoted above, about the science that investigates being as being (*to on he on*). Heidegger famously characterized the fundamental

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<sup>4</sup> See D. Parfit, "The Puzzle of Reality; Why does the Universe Exist?", in: P. van Inwagen and D. W. Zimmerman (eds.), *Metaphysics: the Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 418-427, and R. Swinburne, "Response to Derek Parfit", *ib.*, 427-429. Cp. also P. van Inwagen, "Why Is There Anything at All?", in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 70, 1996, 95-110.

structure of “metaphysics” as being *onto-theo-logy*, roughly: a conception that presents a highest being (*Seiendes*) as the ground of the totality of beings. “Metaphysics,” as structured in this manner, is based in and derives from *Seinsvergessenheit*, from *forgetfulness of Being (Sein)*. According to Heidegger, metaphysics thematizes only beings (*entia, Seiende*), not Being (*esse, Sein*).

That Heidegger is wrong in attributing the forgetfulness of Being to the *entire* metaphysical tradition is something I have shown in several writings, most thoroughly in my most recently published book, *Being and God – A Systematic Approach in Confrontation with M. Heidegger, É. Lévinas, and J.-L. Marion*.<sup>5</sup> The attribution is wrong, most importantly, when raised against Thomas Aquinas, who strongly distinguishes between *ens* and *esse* and who conceives of God in the proper sense as *esse per se subsistens*, not als *primum* or *supremum ens*. To be sure, Thomas Aquinas does not provide an adequate conception of *esse*, having understood *esse* only in the sense of *actus essendi*. But it remains decisively important that Aquinas’s work shows that not only can a metaphysics that includes a theory of being(s) also address the question of Being, but in addition that careful work on theories of being(s) leads *to*, not *away from*, the question of Being. Heidegger himself not only fails to address the question of Being more successfully than does Aquinas—indeed, quite the contrary—but in addition does philosophy an immense disservice by denying that the question can be a metaphysical one. These are issues addressed in detail in *Being and God*.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting to observe that in today’s Germany there is a vast philosophical stream that purports to develop a *post-metaphysical (nachmetaphysische)* type of thinking, astonishingly assuming thereby that the entire classical German philosophical tradition qualifies as metaphysical. A leading exponent of this stream is Jürgen Habermas.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Translated by and in collaborating with Alan White. Forthcoming August 2011 (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press). German: *Sein und Gott. Ein systematischer Ansatz in Auseinandersetzung mit M. Heidegger, É. Lévinas, und J.-L. Marion* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger occasionally (if rarely) recognizes that adequately addressing the question of Being requires consideration of being(s). See *Being and God*, section 2.4.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994); *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987).

One of the most vigorous and polemical schools of postmodern thinking that originated and is still situated mainly in France relies decisively on what its members take to be Heidegger's view of metaphysics, and then uncompromisingly radicalizes this anti-metaphysical stance. Perhaps the most aggressive postmodern author, the French Catholic philosopher and theologian Jean-Luc Marion, goes so far as to state that the main idolatry is "the idolatry of Being";<sup>8</sup> as a consequence he gave one of his major books the striking title "*God without Being*."<sup>9</sup> In *Being and God* I show that Marion's interpretation of Heidegger—one shared with other postmodernist authors—is fundamentally wrongheaded, and that the general view of the metaphysical tradition that is based on it amounts to less than a caricature.

The previous considerations are far from a complete account of what are currently considered to be metaphysical questions or of how those questions are addressed. I have aimed only to identify some of the most salient aspects of the current situation that must be taken into account by a philosopher who attempts to show the need for, and a possible way of, radically rethinking the traditional mainstay of philosophy called "metaphysics".

## 2 Metaphysics in the Primordial Sense and the Question of Being

### 2.1 Disambiguating metaphysics

[1] I consider general metaphysics, understood as a theory of being(s) (*entia, Seiende*), to be an essential part of metaphysics and hence of philosophy. General metaphysics can accurately be called *general ontology* if the word "ontology" is understood in the strict etymological sense. Also essential to metaphysics and to philosophy is special metaphysics, as composed of theories about beings in different domains; these may be called special ontologies. (Husserl called his versions of them *regional ontologies*.) My

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<sup>8</sup> Cp. *Being and God*, section 4.2.5 (Conclusion: "The chief idolatry: the idolatry of Being itself?").

<sup>9</sup> English translation: Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991. Original French edition: *Dieu sans l'être* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1982).

central thesis in this lecture is, however, that there is more to metaphysics than general and special metaphysics, or general and special ontologies, as just characterized. Metaphysics must also include a deeper or more fundamental theory that may be termed *metaphysica prima*—primary metaphysics— or, more adequately, *metaphysica primordialis*— primordial metaphysics. (“Primordial” is build from Latin “*primus* = the first” and “*ordior* = to begin, to originate”). Primordial metaphysics is the *theory of Being* (*esse, Sein*) (not of “being(s)=*ens/entia, Seiende(s)*”). At this point I should remark that what I am calling “primordial metaphysics” in this lecture is called “comprehensive systematics (*Gesamtsystematik*)” in my book *Structure and Being – A Theoretical Framework for a Systematic Philosophy*.<sup>10</sup> (This is the book that will be awarded the Findlay Book Prize.) To radically rethink metaphysics means in the first place to introduce, to explain and to elaborate primordial metaphysics. The aim of this lecture is to explain why primordial metaphysics is needed and what it is.

Although this lecture will not focus on general ontology (general metaphysics), the purposes of the lecture will be served by my introduction, at this point, of a schematic account of the ontology of the structural-systematic philosophy—the philosophy developed in *Structure and Being* and *Being and God*. That ontology presupposes semantics; indeed, that ontology and its semantics are two sides of the same coin. Opposing the standard “compositional” semantics based on the principle of compositionality, according to which the semantic value of a sentence is a function of the semantic values of its subsentential components, I develop an alternative semantics that is based on a strong version of the Fregean context principle: “Only in the context of a sentence do words have meanings.”<sup>11</sup> One of the central theses of the structural-systematic philosophy is that sentences of the (syntactic) subject-predicate form are not acceptable for any philosophical language equipped with an appropriate semantics; what makes them unacceptable are their ontological implications. The ontology that corresponds to subject-predicate sentences is generally called “substance (or object) ontology.” Especially in *Structure and Being*, I show this ontology to be unintelligible

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<sup>10</sup> Translated by and in collaboration with Alan White. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008. German: *Struktur und Sein. Ein Theorierahmen für eine systematische Philosophie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> G. Frege, *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik. Eine logisch-systematische Untersuchung über den Begriff der Zahl*. Centenar Ausgabe, edited by Christian Thiel (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1986), § 62.

and incoherent and, therefore, unacceptable. Sentences without subjects and predicates, like "It's raining," I now term "prime sentences;"<sup>12</sup> they express "prime propositions" that are more precisely interpreted as "prime semantic structures." If a prime proposition is true, it is identical to a prime fact (in the world). The qualifier "prime" is not a counterpart to anything like "secondary," and is not to be understood as synonymous with "simple" (or "atomistic," as in "atomistic sentence"). The term "prime" is instead employed, given the lack of any more appropriate alternative, to designate sentences that do not have the subject-predicate form. It is therefore wholly consequent to speak of "simple prime sentences and propositions" and of "complex prime sentences and propositions" (i.e., sentences or propositions that consist of more than one and indeed often of a great many simple prime sentences or propositions).

The ontological structures emerge directly from the semantic ones. The fundamental ontological "category" (according to traditional terminology) is the "prime fact;" all things (in philosophical terms, all beings or *entities*) are configurations of prime facts. The term "fact" is taken in a comprehensive sense, corresponding to the way this term is normally used in contemporary analytic philosophy (e.g., "semantic fact", "logical fact," etc.). It therefore does not connote, as it does in some terminologies, the perspective of empiricism. What is said above concerning the qualifier "prime" also holds for the term as used in "prime facts." Configurations of prime facts, or complex prime facts (thus also, correspondingly, configurations of prime sentences/propositions, or complex prime sentences/propositions) are of central importance to the structural-systematic philosophy.

[2] I now turn from general ontology to primordial metaphysics. The task in this lecture is to address the first of the following three questions: (1) What is a theory of Being? (2) Why should such a theory be developed? and (3) How should such a theory be developed? There is much more to be said than I can say in this lecture both about the formulation and the meaning of question (1), which has been latent throughout the history of metaphysics, and about questions (2) and (3), which arise immediately once an affirmative answer is given to question (1).

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<sup>12</sup> *Structure and Being* uses the adjective "primary," *Being and God*, "prime."



[i] First of all, one must keep in mind that English has only one word, “being” (and its conjugates, such as “to be”) to translate what are, in various other languages, two distinct words with distinct meanings. The first of the words is the Greek *einai*, the Latin *esse*, and the German *Sein*; the second, the Greek *on*, the Latin *ens*, and the German *Seiendes*. Ambiguity is avoided if the English word is capitalized (and read “capital-Being”) when it corresponds to *einai/esse/Sein*.

The disambiguation just accomplished reveals that any comprehensive metaphysics requires both a theory of Being and a theory of being(s); as I indicated earlier, the latter is appropriately termed “ontology.” From the beginning, the philosophical tradition has dealt for the most part with *ontological* questions and topics. Plato asked only what we mean when we speak of being (*on*),<sup>13</sup> and Aristotle projected “a science that investigates being qua being” (*to on he on*)<sup>14</sup> and spoke only about “the question of being” (*ti to on*).<sup>15</sup> In their wake, metaphysics was understood primarily as a theory of being(s) qua being(s) (*ens quatenus ens*). Thomas Aquinas was the first to make explicit the fundamental distinction between *ens* and *esse*. Much later, Heidegger emphasized the need to clearly distinguish between Being (*Sein*) and being(s) (*Seiende(s)*) and—inappropriately—called this distinction “the ontological difference,” thereby distinguishing it from what he called “ontic” differences. (He failed to notice that both “ontic” and “ontological” refer only to *on/ens/being(s)*.)

[ii] How is one to understand Being? Ordinary English contains a great many extremely variegated and also confusing and confused usages of the term(s) ‘to be/being’. But philosophical accounts need not be bound by ordinary language. The structural-systematic philosophy relies on a philosophical language in order to avoid

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Sophistes* 244a. “Stranger: Str. “Since then, we are in a difficulty, please to tell us what you mean, when you speak of being (ὄν); for there can be no doubt that you always from the first understood your own meaning, whereas we once thought that we understood you, but now we are in a great strait. Please to begin by explaining this matter to us, and let us no longer fancy that we understand you, when we entirely misunderstand you. There will be no impropriety in our demanding an answer to this question, either of the dualists or of the pluralists.”

<sup>14</sup> *Metaphysics* Γ, 1003a21.

<sup>15</sup> *Metaphysics* Z, 1028b4.

the semantic and ontological obscurities, incoherences, and unintelligibilities inherent in natural language(s).

Many philosophers have tried to determine the meaning of “being” in different languages.<sup>16</sup> Aristotle famously stated, in the book Γ of his *Metaphysics*, that “There are many senses in which a thing may be said to ‘be’, but all that ‘is’ is related to one central point, one definite kind of thing [μίαν τινὰ φύσιν], and is not said to ‘be’ by a mere ambiguity.”<sup>17</sup> Today it is customary to identify three central meanings of “to be”: to be is to exist, to be is to be something or other (being as copula, or the predicative meaning), and to be in the sense of identity. I shall not deal with this problem because, as just indicated, I use a philosophical language, not natural or ordinary language. I therefore introduce the word “Being” methodically (in a certain sense quasi-stipulatively) in order to designate (articulate) a topic or subject matter that emerges in the course of systematic philosophical reflection. The meanings of the words (small-)“being” and “Being” can be clarified only by being situated within that course of reflection.

It is of central importance to note that there is nothing arbitrary about the quasi-stipulative introduction of the term “Being.” The need for some term or other arises in the course of philosophical reflection, and “being” is the ordinary-language term closest in signification to what has arisen. As I indicated earlier, capitalizing the term serves to avoid ambiguity.

[iii] The need for the word “Being” becomes evident when we recognize that, with the possible but problematic exception of *nothing*, whatever we think or speak about is *not nothing*.<sup>18</sup> The need is for a term for whatever all items that qualify as not nothing have in common. Even such items as unicorns, Santa Claus, and round squares qualify as not nothing: unicorns *are* mythical animals, Santa Claus *is* a character in many stories, and round squares *are* unintelligible. *Being*, in this double-negative sense, emerges as the most central of all concepts, the concept that is presupposed by all other

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<sup>16</sup> An example: Ch. H. Kahn, *The Verb ‘Be’ in Ancient Greek* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> *Metaphysics* Γ 1003a33-34 (trans. W. D. Ross)

<sup>18</sup> On “nothing,” see *Structure and Being*, p. 445.

concepts, meanings, and the like, and that does not presuppose any other concept as being more central. The merely double-negative meaning that is present at this initial stage of reflection is minimal but nonetheless enormously consequential, because it unmistakably designates the unrestricted universe of discourse, that is, the unrestricted logical, semantic and ontological space of philosophical theorizing. The word “Being”, therefore, is introduced to designate this all-encompassing fundamental or primordial dimension. To be sure, at this initial stage of theorizing this word is associated only with an absolutely minimal “meaning” or “determination”. But this meaning/determination is the beginning of the process of explicating this dimension with increasing determination. This is the task a full-fledged theory of Being must accomplish. Of this, more below.

[iv] It can easily be shown that even in conjunction, general and special ontology—as I described them earlier—do not include Being in their subject matters. I turn now to showing this by commenting first on general metaphysics as traditionally understood as general ontology (2.2), second on analytic ontology (2.3), and third on an Heidegger’s immensely important, although almost completely ignored, resurrection of the question of Being by way of a telling objection to philosophies of subjectivity (2.4).

## 2.2 *Traditional ontology’s failure to thematize Being*

*Traditional ontology* thematizes all beings, in the distributive sense, but only beings: it aims to articulate what is true of every single being and thus of all beings. It understands this totality of beings only extensionally, that is, as the extension of the concept of being (*conceptus entis*). A case in point and a characteristic example is the so-called doctrine of the *transcendentals* that is articulated by the famous statement: *omne ens est unum, verum, bonum* (some versions add *pulchum*)—*every being is one, true, good (beautiful)*. Items in this extensional totality are there because they all *are*—no one of them qualifies as nothing—but accounts of the totality—general ontologies—do *not* explain what qualifies the items for inclusion in the totality. That is, they do not thematize and explain Being.

From another perspective: even extensional totality relies on or presupposes the fact that the elements of the totality have something in common. How is what all beings have in common best designated? In German, it is best designated as *Sein*, in Latin, as

*esse*, and in Greek, as *einai*; in English, there is no term better than “Being.” Because Being is common to all beings, it cannot itself be “a being”—if it were, it would be included among the items that have it in common. This is the essential point.<sup>19</sup>

With the (partial) already mentioned exception of Thomas Aquinas, traditional Christian metaphysics (after Thomas Aquinas) handled the topic “God” within the theoretical framework determined by the concept of being (*conceptus entis*): God was conceived of as *a being*, with the special qualification, “the highest or first being (*ens supremum, ens primum*)”. The relation between God and the finite beings that make up “the world” was understood as being a relation between *beings*. What Heidegger called “the forgetfulness of Being” was a characteristic feature of *this* metaphysics. But Thomas Aquinas conceived of God in the first place as *esse per se subsistens*.<sup>20</sup> If however God is not a being, then philosophical thematization of God must occur not in special ontology—not in natural or rational theology, as in traditional *metaphysica specialis*—but instead in deep or primordial metaphysics (as in *Being and God*).

There can be no doubt that traditional Christian post-Aquinian metaphysics was profoundly deficient: If God is conceived of as *a being*, then Being remains unthematized. As a consequence, God appears to be something secondary, his characterization as “the first, the highest being” notwithstanding. Postmodern Jewish and Christian philosophers (and theologians) have severely criticized metaphysics for just this reason. They do so correctly, to a certain extent, namely as regards the conception of metaphysics dominant following Thomas Aquinas. But those authors attribute this view superficially and undifferentiatedly to the *entire* tradition of metaphysics, to metaphysics *as such*. And then they attempt to conceive of God beyond

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<sup>19</sup> To be sure, in traditional general metaphysics (ontology) “being/*ens*” is often characterized by reference to “to be/Being/*esse*” and vice-versa, or as *id quod habe esse* (that which has Being); in turn, *Esse*/to be/Being is identified as *id quo ens est, vel existit* (that by which the being is, or exists). But such references to *esse*/to be/Being were no more than marginal verbal formulations.

<sup>20</sup> In a few places Thomas uses the wordings ‘*ens primum*,’ ‘*ens supremum*,’ and ‘*maxime ens*.’ But this happens for linguistic (stylistic) reasons, as is made evident by the fact that Thomas always immediately explains these formulations by reducing them to the formulation “*esse per se subsistens*.”

Being or “Otherwise Than Being”<sup>21</sup> or simply “God Without Being”.<sup>22</sup> In so doing, they throw out the baby with the bathwater. I have shown this extensively in *Being and God*.

### 2.3 Analytic metaphysics and the non-thematization of the dimension of Being

With some differentiations that are not of major importance to this lecture the same assessment holds for *analytic metaphysics*. This metaphysics develops only theories about beings, not about Being; analytic metaphysics is the theory of “what there is.”<sup>23</sup> I shall substantiate this claim by briefly commenting on *four* topics or problems or claims being discussed by analytic metaphysicians today.

[1] The *first* concerns the subject-matter of metaphysics. Let us take as an example the book *A Survey of Metaphysics*, written by the respected analytic metaphysician and ontologist E. J. Lowe.<sup>24</sup> According to Lowe’s Introduction, “the central concern [of metaphysics] is with *fundamental structure of reality as a whole*”.<sup>25</sup> Lowe’s “reality as a whole” is, however, no more than an extensional collection of topics and domains. This is made evident by the book’s Table of Contents. The book is divided into six parts, with the following titles: Identity and Change (Part I); Necessity, Essence, and Possible Worlds (Part II); Causation and Conditionals (Part III); Agents, Actions, and Events (Part IV); Space and Time (Part V); Universals and Particulars (Part VI). Lowe remarks that the book does not contain a separate chapter on ontological categories, “because it is difficult to motivate a discussion of categorization in abstraction from a detailed

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<sup>21</sup> É. Lévinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981). Title of the French edition: *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974).

<sup>22</sup> J.-L. Marion, *God Without Being*. See footnote 9.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., W. O. Quine, “On What There Is”, in: *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 2 (1948/1949), pp. 21 - 38; reprinted in: *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 1-19.

<sup>24</sup> Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

treatment of the metaphysical questions that arise as to whether this or that category of entities should or should not be embraced by our ontology, or theory of what there is.”<sup>26</sup> This passage makes clear that even if Lowe were to develop a theory of categories, that theory would be a theory only about *beings* (or things: about “what there is”).

As Lowe’s Table of Contents reveals, his phrase “the fundamental structure of reality as a whole” is deeply misleading, because the book fails to examine what the phrase appears to designate. “As a whole” means only the extension Lowe assigns to “reality”. This extension is constituted by the topics and realms just mentioned as the titles of the six parts of the book. Nothing is said about the factor or the feature that is common to all those topics and realms and that appropriately clarifies what is termed “reality” (or, as is more common in analytic philosophy, “world”). Reality/world isn’t an item included within “reality as a whole”. It remains completely unthematized in Lowe’s *Survey of Metaphysics*.

[2] The *second* topic in current analytic philosophy that is relevant to this lecture is *absolute generality*. The state of the art is presented in a book with that title, published in 2006.<sup>27</sup> The topic is absolutely everything there is. In employing unrestricted quantification we intend to be speaking of everything.<sup>28</sup> In introducing bound variables that range over absolutely everything, we seem to presuppose the existence of an all-inclusive domain. But *is* there such an all-inclusive domain? Those who say there is are called absolutists, those who say there isn’t, non-absolutists. The most “natural” absolutist conception, according to the most widely accepted analytic theoretical framework, is to admit an all-inclusive domain in the sense of what Richard Cartwright calls the *All-in-One-Principle*. According to this principle, the objects in any domain of discourse make up a set or some set-like object. The common objection to this conception relies on the following implication of this principle: there is a set (or set-like object) with all objects as members. Russell’s Paradox, however, shows that there is no set (or set-like object) with all objects as members.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>27</sup> Edited by A. Rayo and G. Uzquiano (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006, reprinted 2009).

<sup>28</sup> See R. Cartwright, “Speaking of Everything”, *Noûs* 28, 1994, 1-20.

A vast discussion on this topic is currently underway, but only two points are relevant to this lecture. First, even if one accepts the concept of the all-inclusive domain presupposed by unrestricted quantification, this domain is only a domain of objects or, more appropriately, of *beings*. Second, current analytic philosophy could conceive of this domain only *extensionally*, as a set or a set-like something. These two points make clear that the current discussions of absolute generality fail to raise the question of what qualification all of the members of the set or collection must satisfy in order to be included within it.

[3] From the preceding consideration of analytic philosophy's treatment of metaphysical topics arises a *third* issue. Analytic philosophers regularly speak of "the world" (the universe, the cosmos)—but what are they then talking about? There is no clear answer to this question. There is something like the intuitively assumed totality of beings. But there is no explanation of this totality. Instead, their "world" is a purely extensional collection: all beings are beings in the world, they all belong to the world, and so forth. What remains completely unthematized and unexplained is why and in what sense these beings are included in "the world," and what "the world" itself is.

[4] A *fourth* (final) issue further elucidates the sense of the question of Being; this issue is the relation between being/Being and existence. As is well known, these terms have been used in many quite different ways in the course of the metaphysical tradition; they sometimes appear as synonyms, but more frequently do not. For various reasons, including some introduced above, in the structural-systematic philosophy they are not synonymous. To further clarify the distinction, I turn now to what Quine, whose influence on analytic philosophy (ontology) is immense, says about this issue. What he says is the following:

It has been fairly common in philosophy early and late to distinguish between being, as the broadest concept, and existence, as narrower. This is no distinction of mine; I mean "exists" to cover all there is, and such of course is the force of the quantifier.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> W. v. O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 100.

Having thus identified existence and being/Being, he writes the following about existence (and hence about being/Being as well):

Existence is what existential quantification expresses. There are things of kind  $F$  if and only if  $\exists x(Fx)$ . This is as unhelpful as it is undebatable, since it is how one explains the symbolic notation of quantification to begin with. *The fact is that it is unreasonable to ask for an explication of existence in simpler terms.* We found an explanation of singular existence, “ $a$  exists,” as “ $(\exists x)(x=a)$ ”; but explication in turn of the existential quantifier itself, “there is,” “there are,” explication of general existence, *is a forlorn cause.*<sup>30</sup>

Quine’s “explanation” is clearly circular: “existence” is explained by means of the existential quantifier, but the quantifier is itself understood or interpreted by means of “existence.” Moreover, Quine simply maintains that it is a *fact* (!) that it would be “unreasonable to ask for an explication of existence in simpler terms.” This may be the case, but even if it is, it is also the case that explications need not involve simpler terms; they can instead involve situating terms or concepts to be explicated within one or more of the broader semantic-ontological fields within which they belong. Quine fails even to consider such fields. The claim that asking about “general existence” is a “forlorn cause” is thus arbitrary and dogmatic.

Quine’s two theses are: (1) being is the same as existence, and (2) the single sense of being or existence is adequately captured by the existential quantifier of formal logic. These theses are accepted as basic within mainstream analytic philosophy. In order to assess them one must distinguish terminological and content matters. If, first, the identification of being and existence is a purely terminological stipulation, no fundamental objection can be raised against it; the only relevant objections would be pragmatic ones (reasons of convenience). But in analytic philosophy, the identification is not a matter merely of terminology; quite the contrary. It masks a fundamental problem, the problem raised by the question of Being. The identification masks the fact that there is an additional question to be addressed. This masking is, in my view, the most striking weakness and limitation of analytic philosophy. It bars the way to essential philosophical questioning and it drastically restricts the subject matter, the

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 97 (emphasis added).



proper task, and the potentialities of philosophy. In the analytic theoretical framework there is no place for what I introduced earlier as primordial metaphysics.

In order to develop a primordial metaphysics as a theory of Being one must strictly distinguish between existence and Being. “Existence” applies only to beings: it characterizes the status of *a being* as *actual* in opposition to only possible or simply impossible. It would therefore be nonsensical to ask whether the dimension of Being exists or not. The real questions to be asked about Being include the following: Is it a genuine philosophical subject matter? Is it intelligible? Is it coherent?

#### 2.4 Heidegger’s restating of the question of Being

It is highly interesting that the question of Being has been resurrected and reformulated within continental philosophy, but not simply as a superficial repristination. Instead, its re-emergence was the result of Heidegger’s rethinking of the history of metaphysics and his overcoming of the philosophy of subjectivity. Unfortunately, soon after retrieving the question of Being Heidegger embarked on a path of thinking that does not qualify as seriously philosophical. Nevertheless, his overcoming of the philosophy of subjectivity is a major contribution to philosophy.

For sake of brevity, I introduce only one passage from Heidegger, a remarkable one from a letter he wrote to Husserl on October 22, 1927, following the publication of *Being and Time*. The letter is a response to the extremely critical remarks Husserl directed against that book. Heidegger opposes Husserl’s procedure of *epoché* and thus Husserl’s absolute privileging of transcendental subjectivity. The most important passage in the letter is the following:

We agree that the being that you [Husserl] call “world” cannot be clarified in its transcendental constitution by means of a recourse to a being having such a mode of Being.

This is not to say that what constitutes the locus of the transcendental is not a being at all—but that is just where the problem arises: what is the mode of being [*Seinsart*] of the being within which “world” is constituted? That is the central problem of *Being and Time*—i.e., a fundamental ontology of Dasein. What must be shown is that the mode of Being [*Seinsart*] of human Dasein is totally different from those of all other

beings and that Dasein's mode of Being, as the one that it is, contains precisely within itself the possibility of transcendental constitution.

[...]

*What does the constituting is not nothing, is thus something and a being—although not in the sense of the positive.*

*The question concerning the mode of Being of what does the constituting is not to be avoided.*

*Universally, therefore, the problem of Being relates to what does the constituting and to what is constituted.<sup>31</sup>*

Here, *Being (Sein)* is clearly understood not as the objective counterpole to subjectivity or to the theoretical dimension or anything of the sort, but instead as the comprehensive, primordial dimension. *Being* is thus the dimension that encompasses both the entire sphere of constituting subjectivity (or: the dimension of theorizing) and the sphere of the constituted world. Such a dimension is unthinkable within the framework of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Yet, as I indicated earlier and have shown in detail elsewhere,<sup>32</sup> Heidegger's subsequent attempts to—as he generally put it—think Being yielded nothing of philosophical significance.

This point made in Heidegger's letter can be generalized such that it applies to any and every kind or conception of subjectivity, including subjectivity as the dimension of the mental in a wider sense, as the whole theoretical apparatus however conceived, and so forth. Subjectivity, no matter how it is understood, *is*.

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<sup>31</sup> German text:

“Übereinstimmung besteht darüber, daß das Seiende im Sinne dessen, was Sie [gemeint ist Husserl] ›Welt‹ nennen, in seiner transzendentalen Konstitution nicht aufgeklärt werden kann durch einen Rückgang auf Seiendes von ebensolcher Seinsart.

Damit ist aber nicht gesagt, das, was den Ort des Transzendentalen ausmacht, sei überhaupt nichts Seiendes – sondern es entspringt gerade das *Problem*: welches ist die Seinsart des Seienden, in dem sich ›Welt‹ konstituiert? Das ist das zentrale Problem von ›Sein und Zeit‹ – d. h. eine Fundamentalontologie des Daseins. Es gilt zu zeigen, daß die Seinsart des menschlichen Daseins total verschieden ist von der aller anderen Seienden und daß sie als diejenige, die sie ist, gerade in sich die Möglichkeit der transzendentalen Konstitution birgt. [...]

*Das Konstituierende ist nicht Nichts, also etwas und seiend – obzwar nicht im Sinne des Positiven.*

*Die Frage nach der Seinsart des Konstituierenden selbst ist nicht zu umgehen. Universal ist daher das Problem des Seins auf Konstituierendes und Konstituiertes bezogen. (E. Husserl, Husserliana, Gesammelte Werke. Vol. IX (1962), Anlage I, 601–602; emphasis added)*

<sup>32</sup> See especially *Being and God*, chapter 2.

### 3 Concluding Remarks

So far, I have attempted to show the need for rethinking metaphysics by revealing the intelligibility of the question of Being. Given its intelligibility, it is also unavoidable because the dimension of Being is always implicitly presupposed by philosophical talk of “beings,” of the “totality of beings,” of “the world (the universe, the reality),” and the like. If we as philosophers do not address this question we lack clarity about the entire theoretical domain within which we as philosophers are situated. Unless we address it, we ignore what, in Goethe’s words, “holds the world together in its innermost.”<sup>33</sup>

Clearly, the next task would be to determine *how* to develop a theory of Being. I of course cannot tackle that task in this lecture. My aim in this lecture has been to reveal the need for philosophy to directly ask and to clearly formulate the question of Being; the aim has not been to tackle the formidable task of effectively developing a primordial metaphysics. I have however tackled that task in *Structure and Being* and *Being and God*. Here, in conclusion, I need to add only two additional remarks. First, I conceive of primordial metaphysics more specifically as a theory of *Being as such and as a whole*, and thus as composed of two subtheories, *a theory of Being as such* and *a theory of Being as a whole*. Second, there is an opinion widespread among both analytic and continental philosophers that the broadest questions—among which the question of Being is certainly included—even if they are not rejected as entirely meaningless, cannot be treated with theoretical rigour. Some continental philosophers nevertheless do address such questions, but in so doing neglect all standards of rigorous thinking. Those analytic philosophers who see some sense in asking such questions generally proceed on the assumption that they cannot deal with them rigorously. I strongly reject both of these contentions and approaches. I think that it is pointless to have endless and exhausting discussions about the possibility or impossibility of rigorously addressing broad philosophical questions, including of course and above all the question of Being. The alternative approach I advocate is to *effectively attempt* to rigorously address them, as I have done in *Structure and Being* and *Being and God*. That *Structure and Being* is to

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<sup>33</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, Part I, Scene I.

receive the Findlay Book Prize of the Metaphysical Society of America I take as an immensely welcome indication that my efforts may not have been in vain.