

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

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ABSTRACT. This paper begins by indicating why metaphysics is in need of radical rethinking. The metaphysics that is a traditional mainstay of philosophy is an inquiry with a comprehensive scope. At present, inquiry that is metaphysical in this sense is not characteristic either of (so-called) continental or analytic philosophy. Continental philosophers, for the most part, continue to understand metaphysics as comprehensive, but—in the wake of such thinkers as Kant, Nietzsche, and Heidegger—tend to exclude metaphysics from philosophy, with some going so far as to dub ours the post-metaphysical era or epoch. Analytic philosophers, on the other hand, have in recent years been producing many “metaphysical” works—including introductions, textbooks, systematic expositions, companions, and handbooks—but the “metaphysics” pursued in these works is an inquiry with a severely *restricted* scope, indeed limited to the subject matter of what was, earlier in the tradition, designated *metaphysica specialis* (although with a few additions, including the issues of categories and universals, and various topics taken to be shared with philosophical logic). The radical rethinking announced in this paper’s title aims to revive metaphysics as inquiry with a comprehensive scope, indeed, as universal science.

Having identified the need for radically rethinking metaphysics, the paper introduces an ambiguity that has plagued the entire metaphysical tradition and that, unresolved, obscures the central question that the rethinking of metaphysics must address. This question is best termed the question of Being, but the “Being” in question must be disambiguated. The English word “being” can translate, on the one hand, the Greek *einai*, the Latin *esse*, and the German *Sein*, but also, on the other, 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); the latter is appropriately termed “ontology.” Ontological inquiry has characterized the philosophical tradition from the beginning. Plato asked only what we mean when we speak of being (*on*), and Aristotle projected “a science that studies being qua being” (*to on he on*, *Met.* Γ, 1003a21) and writes of “the question of being” (*ti to on*, *Met.* Z, 1028b4. 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*, but he failed to develop an adequate conception of *esse*, having understood *esse* only as *actus essendi* (act of Being). Much later, Heidegger emphasized the need to clearly distinguish between Being (*Sein*) and being(s) (*Seiendes*) and—inappropriately—called this distinction “the ontological difference,” thereby distinguishing it from the differences among beings he called “ontic” differences. (He failed to notice that both “ontic” and “ontological” refer only to *on/ens/being(s)*.)

This paper shows that any current attempt to rethink metaphysics by clearly and directly addressing the question of Being must heed (at least) the following three points. First,

although Heidegger merits praise for having reopened the question of Being, his own way of responding to it is unacceptable, because it does not meet even the most basic theoretical requirements concerning clarity, rigor, or argumentation. Second, the identification of Being and existence accepted by most analytic philosophers in the wake of Quine must be flatly rejected, because it results from and thereby perpetuates the failure to recognize and hence to tackle the question of Being. According to the terminology used in this paper (and in other writings of its author), only beings either do or do not exist; it would be absurd to ask whether or not (the dimension of) Being exists. Third, the grand lessons of the history of philosophy must be radically taken into account. Especially, the most important periods and turning points must be heeded: from the beginning with Plato/Aristotle, through the medieval period, metaphysics was approached on the basis of a kind of naive (unreflective) natural attitude. Things changed dramatically with the turn, in modern times, to the subject (subjectivity, mind, Spirit). Finally, the linguistic turn (accompanied by what can be called the logical turn) once again transformed the entire *status quaestionis*.

The attempt to rethink the question of Being against this extremely complicated background constitutes a huge task. The final part of this paper sketches the approach to the task taken in the author's two books *Structure and Being: A Theoretical Framework for a Systematic Philosophy* (Penn State UP, 2008), and *Being and God: A Systematic Approach in Confrontation with Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion* (Northwestern UP, forthcoming 2011).