Ontology: Living Philosophy in Contemporary Times

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THE WORLD?

13 October 2019 at Carindale Library Meeting Room

The concept of the world enlarges our thinking on being, and by 'world' we are thinking on 'worlds'. From the question of personal identity, we very quickly try to understand others or the infamous 'Other'.

THE ESSAY

(The works listed are not a complete coverage of the contemporary field but to provide the best known and most significant in contemporary discussions. Apologies if anything important has been missed)

An important point made in the previous teaching essay was how ontology broke off as a separate field of philosophical endeavour in the seventeenth century. Christian Wolff, influenced by Leibniz's time-space categories (modalities of being), had argued that the old metaphysics had been too abstract around generalities. The study of ontology needed to be more particular, on matters of 'soulish' being (an ancient concept of the soul), which led to discussions on what is 'human being', as well as 'empirical' or 'phenomenological' endeavours on what being is a person. The discussion of being quickly picked up the problem of identity, with mathematical enquiries of the ancient question of 'the one and the many'. Locke is an important early driver on the personal identity question through the psychological (empirical) endeavours on memory. The continental tradition, following Kant and Wolff, however, based investigations of such questions on phenomenology. The difference between the two approaches is the belief in phenomenology that the study can go to the direct experience (subject) of an object. The British tradition in the philosophical psychology deferred, instead, to the theoretical judgement, the scientific method of the study and what is post-experiential.

Contemporary ontology tends to follow the continental tradition, but the contemporary debates engage the British analytic and American pragmatic criticisms and modifications. What also complicates the contemporary field is an understanding of the formal study of ontology (as described above) as oppose to an understanding of study fields where ontology has (again) branched out. The 'Ontology of Art' is a current discussion in aesthetics. Logicians are now looking at the intersection of logic and ontology. Social ontology is the study of the nature and properties of the social world, and is very important today in

sociology and political-governmental studies. In this essay I will put aside most of these more particular and applied questions, and focus on the formal field in contemporary times. Nevertheless, I will return to the question of social ontology at the end of the essay.

I have also passed-by the ontological questions which are discussed as the larger frame of contemporary metaphysics, except to point the reader to the work of David Lewis. As discussed in the previous essay, particular metaphysical questions can reach high technical levels of discussions. One set of those highly technical discussions on ontology comes from David Lewis, an American philosopher who had a close association with the Australian philosophy community. Lewis was not included in the metaphysics essay as his work has taken the discussion of both metaphysics and ontology to a whole new level, and has as much significance for the fields of philosophy of epistemology, philosophical logic, language, philosophy of mind, philosophy of probability, and aesthetics. It is Lewis who developed the thinking on counterfactuals (the theory of possible worlds) and modal realism, from his books, *Counterfactuals* (1973) and *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986). It is important to understand that Lewis is propounding a plurality of possible worlds in a concrete sense – the modality is real. Saul Kripke also refers to 'possible worlds' in his discussion, but as a critic of Lewis' argument, Kripke does not hold that possible worlds are real; they are ideal constructs in thought experiments to derive at a philosophical truth. I am assuming – and I could be wrong – that Lewis is saying there are 'real possibilities'. Lewis has a 'Fundamental Ontology' which undergirds his larger argument. The Lewisian fundamental ontology is so highly technical that the Stanford Encyclopaedia entry has a 'simplified version' that makes a distinction between an 'Almost Lewis' and the actual 'Lewis' explanation. I invite the reader to consider the entry if they so wish. The important point, here in this essay, is that following discussions on contemporary ontology will inevitably be backgrounded or intersect with David Lewis' work.

Meta-Ontology

A good place to start is looking at the meta-philosophical view, and then drill downwards, and, of course, we immediately have an ontological proposition. A recent work which provides a metaontological view is Amie Thomasson's *Ontology Made Easy* (Oxford University Press, 2015). Drawing on her earlier work, *Ordinary Objects* (2007), and from the thinking of Rudolf Carnap, Thomasson argues that Ontological sentences — sentences about what there is — must in order to be meaningful be governed by rules of use. Ontological questions can be answered by conceptual and empirical means. By appealing to these rules of use one can reason one's way from philosophically uncontroversial premises to the existence of what are otherwise seen as philosophically controversial entities.

The main philosopher who has done the most in recent times to drive the metaontological view is Alain Badiou. His own views, however, do **not** fit the typical metaphilosophical schema. Although he was a founder of the faculty of Philosophy of the Université de Paris VIII with Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard, his arguments do not confirm to the postmodern mould, and nor is it a reinstatement of modernity beliefs. Badiou's major contribution has been *Being and Event* (Bloomsbury Revelations, 1988). It is a mathematical project which is seeking compatibility between the subject and object-orientated ontologies, and in particular, reconciliation between post-structuralist and constructivist ontologies. There are two conceptual elements here. First, the ontology, which is 'the science of *being qua being'* (being in itself), Secondly, there is the event – which is seen as a rupture in being – through which the subject finds realization and reconciliation with truth. The reconciliation is mathematical, to be precise, set theory, and specifically Zermelo–Fraenkel set theory (with the axiom of choice).

Object-Oriented Ontology

The mathematical turn in ontology is a more recent development and has to be contrasted with the earlier Object-Oriented Ontology coming from Heidegger. Heidegger is an important historical figure for the contemporary ontological debates, centring on the arguments of his *Being and Time* (1927). His approach was known as Existential phenomenology, which distinguishes Heidegger's philosophy from the established modern phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Husserl's approach is known as phenomenological reduction, an act of suspending judgment about the natural world to instead focus on analysis of experience. Husserl is singularly concerned about intentionality, what is more than a person's claimed intention and is about how mental representation occurs.

It is important to understand Husserl's two targets as major critiques in the effort to develop a strictly scientific account (the phenomenology). First, Husserl criticized what he saw as 'Historicism'. Unfortunately, this is a very confused area of discussion due to the conflation of two terms that Karl Popper used in his more helpful attempt to clarify the miscommunication. In *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957)and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) Popper described 'Historicism' as "an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their primary aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the 'rhythms' or the 'patterns', the 'laws' or the 'trends' that underlie the evolution of history". This was Popper's target of criticism. In contrast, Popper used the 'Historism' to means the tendency to regard every argument or idea as completely accounted for by its historical context, as opposed to assessing it by its merits. Historism does not aim for the 'laws' of history, but premises the individuality of each *historical* situation. However, Husserl's criticism not only conflates the two meanings, he rejects the

historical approach in total. Husserl adopts the *a-historical* understanding of intentionality. Secondly, Husserl criticized what is commonly called, by the logicians, 'Psychologism', defined as "The view or doctrine that a theory of psychology or ideas forms the basis of an account of metaphysics, epistemology, or meaning; sometimes and specially the explanation or derivation of mathematical or logical laws in terms of psychological facts." Again, there is a conflation of ideas. Not only, in Husserl's view, intentionality is a-historical, it is empty of all psychological content or motivation. Like all foolish logical positivists, there was a presumption that meaning could be reduced to a mathematical language eventually.

Back to Heidegger and his important influence on contemporary ontology – the Heideggerian approach, for good and bad, retrieved the historical and psychological elements missing in Husserl's account. Heidegger's argument was that phenomenology should be based on an observation and analysis of *Dasein* (being-there), the human being. Such an object of study does have historical and psychological dimensions. In Heidegger's view, people are thrown into the world in a given situation, but they are also a project towards the future, possibility, freedom, wait, hope, anguish. That was his intention of *Being and Time* (1927), but it is highly contentious as to whether he achieved such an explanation. Heidegger, and to an extent also his works, fell out of favour, due to his monstrous failing in his own *Dasein* (in the historical and psychological terms) when he denied to many others the projects of possibility, freedom, hope, etc. It is a marvel that Hannah Arendt could forgive Heidegger's betrayals and lack of humanity by his own standards. Nevertheless, it has proved too difficult to simply ignore Heidegger's works. Despite his personal failing, Heidegger has important insights of *Dasein* which continues to be very informative in a range of philosophical debates.

In particular, there is his view of *Dasein* as a tool-being. This is the subject of Graham Harman's *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Open Court Publishing, 2002). For Heidegger, theoretical knowledge represents only one kind of intentional behaviour, and he asserts that it is grounded in more fundamental modes of behaviour and forms of practical engagement with the surrounding world. Whereas a theoretical understanding of things grasps them according to 'presence,' for example, this may conceal that our first experience of a being may be in terms of its being 'ready-to-hand.' Thus, for instance, when someone reaches for a tool such as a hammer, their understanding of 'what a hammer is' is not determined by a theoretical understanding of its presence, but by the fact that it is something we need at the moment we wish to do hammering. Only a later understanding might come to contemplate a hammer as an object. The 'ready-to-hand' tool-being is not something that Heidegger sees as mostly good; as having a hammer to hand to be able to build something beneficially. Indeed, it can be read as an equivalent

doctrine to instrumentalism. This perspective leads to Heidegger's historical view on technology.

Heidegger sees poetry and technology as two contrasting ways of 'revealing', but modern technology has reached the stage where the subject and object is subsumed together. Today, in technology, the whole universe of beings is placed into an undifferentiated 'standing reserve' (*Bestand*) of energy available for any use to which humans choose to put it. Here the danger looms large. If *Dasein* was not to be our salvation (the flourishing human being), Heidegger saw the trajectory of the Western world as a wasteland populated by tool-using brutes, characterized by an unprecedented ignorance and barbarism (I see the influence here of T.S. Eliot). Here, we have the importance of Graham Harman's contemporary work. Harman extends Heidegger's famous tool-analysis beyond Heidegger's narrower theory of human practical activity to create the ontology of objects themselves.

Since his doctoral work in 1999, Graham Harman had established the new sub-field of object-oriented ontology (OOO), and most recently revealed in *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (Penguin, 2018). The basic idea is that human existence ought not to be privileged over the existence of nonhuman objects. Harman's target of criticism is the 'anthropocentrism' of Kant's Copernican Revolution, where Immanuel Kant sees phenomenal objects conforming to the mind of the subject and, in turn, become products of human cognition. In contrast, Harman argues that objects exist independently (as Kantian *noumena*) of human perception, and are not ontologically exhausted by their relations with humans or other objects. There is some overlap in this view with speculative realism (or speculative materialism), but that is an umbrella term, covering different versions also known as post-Continental philosophy. The common theme is that speculative realist thinkers have a shared resistance to philosophies of human finitude inspired by the Kantian tradition, and they reject what they call 'correlationism' which is "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other." The argument is that we can 'know' the object-in-itself in a realistic sense over against the arguments of the continental idealists. What makes the arguments of the 'speculative realism/materialism works is the proposition that the 'imagining' is equally a legitimate form of knowledge as any theorisation. If you can 'realistically' imagine it, you know the object. Not all philosophers in object-oriented ontology may go as far as the legitimatization of all imagining (resisting the extreme conclusions). Although there are insightful observations in the argument, my own view is that, in a hypo-objectification, the loss of the subject is not a good or a truth that many such object-orientated thinkers believe it is. The loss of subjectivity would easily lead to very ugly tool-beings.

While outside of the space of formal ontology, and more directly in the space of political theory in ontology, one ought to note, in passing, Jean-Luc Nancy's and Aurélien Barrau's *What's These Worlds Coming To?* (Fordham University Press, 2014). Barrau is a French physicist, and a philosopher who studied with Nancy, who is a philosopher who has been influenced by both Hegel and Heidegger; developing a reorientation of Heidegger's work. Nancy argues that it is necessary to think freedom in its finite being, because to think of it as the property of an infinite subject is to make any finite being a limit of freedom. The existence of the other is the necessary condition of freedom, rather than its limitation. The recent book co-written, argues that we no longer create, we appropriate and montage, since we no longer live in a world, but in worlds. Following this logic, Nancy and Barrau argue that we do not build sovereign, hierarchical political institutions anymore; we form local assemblies and networks of cross-national assemblages and we do this at the same time as we form multinational corporations that no longer pay taxes to the State. They call this program 'the struction of dis-order'. In my view such a program would not be emancipating but would reinstitute the absolutist ontology as bad as those old structures rejected. The point then is that contemporary ontological debates have real-life consequences.

Part-Whole-Oriented Ontology (Mereology), Basic Formal Ontology (BFO), and Web Ontology Language (OWL)

So far we considered two directions of contemporary ontology, the meta-Ontology, and Object-Oriented Ontology, and above I signalled a mathematical turn – which we now come to in three closely related movements. Mereology begins the move through the field of mathematic logic which looks at the part–whole relationships, in contrast to a taxonomy whose categorisation is based on discrete sets (as in set theory). Peter Simons' *Parts: A Study in Ontology* (Oxford University Press, 1985) shows that mereology or the formal theory of part and whole is essential to ontology. A meronomy or partonomy is a type of hierarchy, and the unit of meronomical classification is meron, while the unit of taxonomical classification is taxon. In the context of knowledge representation and ontologies, a meronomy is a partial ordering of concept types by the part–whole relation, and with three axioms, the part-of relation is:

- Transitive – "Parts of parts are parts of the whole" – if A is part of B and B is part of C, then A is part of C.
- Reflexive – "Everything is part of itself" – A is part of A.
- Antisymmetric – "Nothing is a part of its parts" – if A is part of B and A ≠ B then B is not part of A.

Meronomies may be represented in Semantic Web languages such as Web Ontology Language (OWL). Here we are looking at domain ontologies in new disciplinary fields, such

as biomedical informatics. This applied ontology offers a strategy for the organization of scientific information in computer-tractable form, drawing on concepts not only from computer and information science but also from linguistics, logic, and philosophy. The core features of the Basic Formal Ontology (BFO) are now used by over one hundred ontology projects around the world. Basic Formal Ontology (BFO) is a top-level (i.e. domain-neutral) ontology developed by Barry Smith and his associates for the purposes of promoting interoperability among domain ontologies, built in its terms through a process of downward population. This is explained in Barry Smith's *Building Ontologies with Basic Formal Ontology* (MIT Press, 2015). Smith also describes Web Ontology Language (OWL), a family of knowledge representation languages for authoring ontologies. The OWL languages are characterized by formal semantics, the rigorous mathematical study of the meaning of programming languages. The semantics involves evaluating the meaning of syntactically (i.e. allocating sets of rules) valid strings defined by a specific programming language. And here, in my view, we reach the limit of mathematic predominance. Rule-making is not axiomatic as socially-disconnected geeks believe the process to be. As Wittgenstein demonstrated, rule-making is necessarily tied to a way of life.

Social Ontology

Enter then Social ontology. In *Ontological Investigations: An Inquiry into the Categories of Nature, Man, and Society* (Routledge, 1989), Ingvar Johansson brings a return to the analytic metaphysics. He devises a theory of categories inspired by Aristotle and Husserl, starting out from the view that universals exist but only in the spatiotemporal world (immanent realism). Johansson conceives the cement of the universe as Husserlian relations of existential dependence and regards intentionality as a non-reducible category in the ontology of mind. The work is thoroughly metaphysical realist, but large sections are nonetheless insightful to conceptualists and nominalists as well.

Another direction in social ontology comes from the recent works of Timothy Morton. His *Ecology Without Nature* (Harvard University Press, 2007) is ground-breaking, given how the contemporary common-sense view is so invested in the concept of 'Nature'. Morton argues that the chief stumbling block to environmental thinking is the image of nature itself. The problem is a symptom of the ecological catastrophe in which we are living, where the ecological zeal to preserve the 'natural world' actually leads away from the 'nature' model. To conserve and restore the planet non-natural paths have to be taken. Morton sets out a seeming paradox: to have a properly ecological view, we must relinquish the idea of nature once and for all.

Timothy Morton's more recent work, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), takes a slightly different angle on the same question. The term 'hyperobjects' was inspired by Björk's 1996 single 'Hyperballad' and has been used in computer science since 1967. Morton uses the term to explain objects so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend localization, such as climate change and styrofoam. We come back to the object-oriented ontological perspective, but Morton's work appears to retain the subjectivism of the continental tradition, and cannot be aligned with post-Continental philosophy (speculative realism or speculative materialism). He has written extensively about the literature of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley, Romanticism, diet studies, and ecotheory. Here, as a personal view, Morton has a much better, and more rounded view of hyperobjects and their impact on how we think, how we coexist with one another and with nonhumans, and how we experience our politics, ethics, and art. He avoids the extremism of the both anti-humanism and anti-scientism seen among fringe elements of the Deep Green movement. Morton proposes that an ecological criticism must be divested of the bifurcation of nature and civilization, or the idea that nature exists as something that sustains civilization, but exists outside of society's walls.

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Hyperballad by Björk

We live on a mountain

Right at the top

There's a beautiful view

From the top of the mountain

Every morning I walk towards the edge

And throw little things off

Like car-parts, bottles and cutlery

Or whatever I find lying around

It's become a habit

A way to start the day

I go through all this

Before you wake up

So I can feel happier

To be safe up here with you

I go through all this

Before you wake up

So I can feel happier

To be safe up here with you

It's real early morning

No-one is awake

I'm back at my cliff

Still throwing things off

I listen to the sounds they make

On their way down

I follow with my eyes 'til they crash

Imagine what my body would sound like

Slamming against those rocks

When it lands

Will my eyes

Be…

Source: LyricFind

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