

THE SENSE OF METAPHYSICS IN CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT

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From its very beginnings (see Aristotle), metaphysics has been an onto-theological discourse, despite the restrictions introduced by some modern and contemporary thinkers. Ontology is the “science” of differentiated and determined being which, after all, posits itself as the suprasensible ground of sensible things (more exactly, of compound things, since from a rigorous metaphysical point of view any thing is a compound consisting of the sensible and the suprasensible); or, if we reshape this definition, since there cannot exist one single differentiated and determined being, but only several beings, ontology is the “science” of differentiated and determined “beings” that posit themselves, in the last resort, as the suprasensible forms or essences of sensible things (more exactly, of the compounds). It follows that ontology should investigate the domain of (suprasensible) essences, of “archetypes”. On the other hand, metaphysical theology refers us to the idea of “God”, of supreme, undifferentiated and indeterminate being, who transcends and is separated from differentiated and determined entities (regardless of whether the latter manifest themselves as ideal essences or compounds), but who makes them possible or “generates” them. If we accept this sense of the term metaphysics as well as the distinction outlined above between ontology and theology (they can be accepted, at least as a work hypothesis), we should wonder to what extent the two are still operational nowadays. Our immediate answer, as we said above, is that they still are, to a large extent. The metaphysical models proceeding from Platonism, neo-Platonism, Augustinism, Thomism and so forth are unchallengeable evidence in this respect. The relation between the increate being and the beings created by the increate being in their

capacity of sensible-suprasensible individualities, as well as the specific nature of the creative act (through the mere intermediation of eternal ideas, of archetypes or the intermediation of the “divine” Logos that contains them), is the most basic question of the “philosophies” listed above. There has been much talk about the crisis of this traditional type of metaphysical thought. This position, which is advocated by the opponents of any form of metaphysics, and not only by them, is, however, devoid of any historical-philosophical legitimacy, as we have already pointed out.

It follows that the original sense of metaphysics is that of onto-theological discourse. However, modern and contemporary thought has not accepted this traditional perspective in its entirety. Its critics have introduced a fundamental restriction by ridding the concept of its theological attribute, thus retaining only the attribute of ontological discourse. Thereby, the concept of metaphysics has come to coincide with that of ontology. But this is only the first theoretical correction they accomplish. The change in theoretical outlook is carried out when the idea of essence-being as object of the archetype that transcends things and is separated from the latter (but which can, nevertheless, descend into the intimacy of matter, thereby creating the things as sensible-suprasensible structures), is replaced by the idea of essence-being as subject of metaphysics becomes a “subjective ontology” or an ontology of human subjectivity. If we were to give credit to some interpreters (first of all to Heidegger), this change of theoretical perspective, which starts with Descartes, is accomplished by Kant in his Critique of Pure Reason. The essence-being would not be identical here with the essence-being of the object-thing, but with the “original act of a knowing thinking” (see Kant’s thesis with respect to being¹). In other words, it would be “the principle of the original synthetic unity of apperception”, the I think, the self-consciousness which “needs to accompany” all the other representations of mine and which by virtue of its permanent identity with itself ensures the

¹ *Kants These über das Sein*, in: *Wegmarken*, Gesamtausgabe, Band 9, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1976.

synthetical-transcendental unity of the “diversity of intuitions” that can inhabit any consciousness¹. Of course, one might wonder how justified such an interpretation is. If we consider as starting point the broad sense that Kant assigns the term metaphysics, designating by it not only the systematic ensemble of knowledge that can be “extracted” from pure reason but also the philosophical “criticism” that “studies the faculty of reason with regard to any a priori pure knowledge”² and if we emphasize the last acceptance, trying to assess what is, according to Kant, the principle of any a priori knowledge, of any a priori “determining” thought, then, beyond any doubt, we can work out, as Heidegger does, a feasible coherent interpretation.

The idea of metaphysics as ontology of the human subject, as ontology of subjectivity has left a distinctive mark on modern and, first of all, on contemporary thought. The sustained efforts undertaken by some of the most important contemporary thinkers have been directed toward two distinct goals: 1) to free the “I” (concept of subjectivity) from the “carcass” of transcendental isolationism in which it was locked by Kant (we should remember that the Kantian procedure is, however, tributary, beyond any doubt, to Descartes); and 2) to free the subjective being or the being considered to be simultaneously subjective and more than subjective from the dominance of the determinations of the real and of the act in order to project them, as much as it is possible, onto the horizon of the possible. Thus, Husserl’s transcendental ego is not limited to the subject’s pure self-consciousness that it is a thinking subject since his/her “self-perception” as a thinking “I” is originally supplemented with the subject’s being a Logos, an a priori universal capable to assign senses and configure possible worlds (see Cartesian Meditations). Likewise, Heidegger’s Dasein is not a subject in the traditional acceptance of the term, but a “subject” – if we wish to preserve this expression for one of the

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, hrsg. von Raymund Schmidt, 2. Aufl., Leipzig, 1930, *Transzendente Analytik*, § 16, 17, 18.

² *Ibidem*, *Transzendente Methodenlehre*, chap. *Die Architektonik der Reinen Vernunft*.

key attributes of the concept mentioned above – that originally transcends itself toward the world that is part of its being or, in other words, a “subject” whose essence consists in originally exceeding its limitations as a possibly isolated being and positing itself as being in the world.

The requirement of thinking in an innovating way is also reflected, as I have already pointed out, in the attempt to free the (subjective) being of human ontology from the dominance of the modal category of reality (actuality) in order to place it under the jurisdiction of possibility. This requirement can be recognized at first with Husserl, although one cannot say that it is very successfully delineated there. Of course, the Husserlian “Logos” is creator of multiple senses and it configures possible worlds. It posits itself as an (a priori and suprasensible) core that generates (suprasensible) potentialities, i.e. forms and structures that cannot be the object of immediate experience. Considered from the point of view of its effects, it constitutes itself into a possible being or rather into a being that “possibilizes”, i.e. one that makes possibilities possible. However, it remains significantly anchored into actuality, since the way in which it “perceives itself” as a transcendental ego is limited to an intellectual self-intuition, i.e. to “self-evidence” given by the pure immediacy of actuality. Heidegger’s philosophy gets closer to its goals than Husserl’s, but it cannot complete them genuinely either. Beyond any doubt Dasein is, in terms of its constitutive essence, a being that projects itself toward those possibilities which are peculiar to itself and which form – in their entirety – a kind of horizon or environment that delimits it and determines it in respect of what is most specific, characteristic or distinctive of it. Dasein’s primary project emphasizes its basic possibility of being, which is a temporal possibility as to its nature, or it rather emphasizes its “future” possibility, the one reserved for it in the future, which is closure and death. Dasein owes its potential being entirely to the temporal dimension of the future, which is inherent to it. However, Dasein’s potential mode of being is not a so-called “agnoseological” one since its “location” in the project of revelatory understanding is among its basic original characteristics. Through the anticipatory

decision (the highest form of understanding), Dasein reveals itself at the height of its authentic existence, i.e. as a being whose “sense” proceeds from the “towards-what” (das Woraufhin) toward which it directs itself¹, from temporal unity of future toward which it projects itself and which necessarily implies the undeniable possibility of closure and of death. However much might Heidegger emphasize the idea of being as possibility, nevertheless, he does not succeed in identifying the being of Dasein with a pure potential being or in equating the content of anticipatory decision with a whatness projected onto the pure possibility of making possible, since both imply besides the additional determinations of past those of the present as well as those of making present. Therefore, in the long run, the being of the Dasein posits itself both as a potential being and as an actual one...

The central concept of metaphysics, i.e. the one around which the great theories and systems have been worked out, has been the concept of being. Ignoring the existence of distinct shades of meaning, we will say that the being of “ontology” (but see Aristotle’s analogical being, which is an exception) is a “generic”, a “predicative” concept, i.e. a concept in its own right. The being of “theology” (i.e. God, the undifferentiated and indeterminate being) is, in exchange, a concept in that it is also a mental “representation”, a mental “hypothesis”, a (suprasensible) “act of conception” of the mind; however, it is acategorical and apredicative, being located on the level of conceptual generalization. We might say that it is rather a “supraconcept”, a tautological “concept” (a tautological “act of conception”), subject and predicate at the same time, the pure self-identity of the terms of a tautological judgment, or even the pure self-identity of some terms devoid of any determination, or the expression of some equivalence relation of a term with itself. The entire positivity of this relation resides in the assertion of its internal negativity, of its logical indeterminateness, as well as in the positing of this negativity, of this indeterminateness as the supreme limit and starting

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Halle, Max Niemayer Verlag, 1935, p.324.

point at which all the elaborations produced by determinative and generalizing thinking could be understood.

Contemporary metaphysics or rather contemporary (metaphysical) ontology has proposed to “bring down” the concept of being from the pedestal and to “set up” in its stead the concept of nothingness. Paradoxically, Heidegger himself attempts to do this, in spite of his efforts to restore the great philosophical senses of the term being. In *What is Metaphysics?* he at least believes that philosophical thought should emphasize the nothing, and that we should understand by it that concealed whatness which might “constitute” the ground without essence (“the nothing itself nihilates”, he says) of all beings, including human beings, i.e. of Dasein. We consider this essay as an extremely interesting philosophical “sketch” marked by a remarkable effort to think very deeply, although, in our opinion (which we cannot present in detail here), this effort is affected by the “ontologist” understanding of the nothing, a way of understanding that has its origin in Plato’s conception (with Plato, as the Sophist suggests, the nothing is not absolute nothing, but merely a being that is different from being as such, from the completely determined being; it is therefore a being that is grounded in some sort of horizon of indeterminateness and reveals itself as the Other of being as such).

Finally, we would also like to remark that metaphysical thinking and the working out of metaphysical systems or conceptions may sometimes imply resorting even to the concept of becoming as a central concept, which is the contrary (opposite) of the concept of being. In the best metaphysical-philosophical tradition, becoming is the basic characteristic of the sensible world, of the “physical” universe, of the “physical” configuration and structures. So, the question: given this, how could becoming metamorphose itself into a metaphysical concept? Well, it has metamorphosed, by a transfer of one of the essential attributes of the concept of being, namely that of eternity (being can also represent, among other things, what is eternal or “imperishable”); starting to designate what might be taken as a constant or an “invariable” of all things, becoming has essentialized itself, has substantialized itself, has “hypostatized” itself and... has become a

metaphysical concept. It is true that if we were to consider Heraclitus as a metaphysical thinker (which, however, as some historians of philosophy argue, should not be the case since thereat thinker is merely one of the forerunners of metaphysics, like Parmenides), i.e. if we accept this characterization, then we feel obliged to note that this conceptual metamorphosis started long ago... In more accurate terms, however, becoming is posited as a metaphysical concept only later, namely in Hegel's work, since here, for the first time, becoming is interpreted not only as the fundamental principle of all things, but also as a suprasensible principle. Of course, becoming is the reality intrinsic to things; it constitutes their subsistence and permanence. Being and the nothing are only its fundamental components; they are not posited in and for themselves, but subsist in becoming. Becoming is their truth, their subsistence, it is the eternal that intermediates the passage from one contrary to another. The truth of the being and of the nothing "is this movement of unmediated, direct disappearance of one into the other; their truth is becoming, a movement in which both are different; their difference is, however, one that has been cancelled similarly, in a manner just as direct and unmediated."¹ But becoming is also the ideal essence of things, their "objective" concept: between thought and their "nature" there is relation of identity, and this identity resides in the ideality of their becoming, in the "conceptual" (suprasensible) identity of their becoming².

We can also perceive an obvious metaphysical influence in the manner in which a thinker influential on contemporary philosophy, like Nietzsche, interprets the concept of becoming. Becoming as an ultimate (immanent) principle of the world would coincide with the will to power, which is a will to creative power, a will to power determined from the interior, by a creative "telos", by an ("invisible", suprasensible) energy that generates forms, structures, configurations. In addition, the introduction of the idea of eternal return of all things (and of their determinations), of

¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, Erster teil, Stuttgart, Fr. Frommans Verlag, 1936, p.89.

² Ibidem, p. 39, p.45-46.

cyclical, “eternal” time, sets up a criterion of metaphysical “fixity” as well as a principle of being in time that largely cancels the idea of creative newness as such, which is ab initio implied by the conception about becoming as will for power or about the will for power as becoming.

We come across the same kind of subversive-persistent presence of the concept of being in Whitehead’s thought. This can be assessed both at the level of reflection about the basic category, which is that of “creativity”, and at the level of reflection about the primary categorial units of existence which are the actual entities. Creativity, a universal operation or function, represents the unifying factor of the diversity of the world, or the principle that “binds” its diversity into a unity. But the concept of unity necessarily refers to the concept of being; we might even say that it presupposes it. As to the concept of “actual entity”, it can be characterized in the following words: “How an actual entity becomes is constitutive of what that entity is; so, the two descriptions of the actual entity are not independent. Its <<being>> is constituted by its <<becoming>>. This is the principle of the process”¹. Here we have to do with an operation of identification or equation of the terms being and becoming, as well as with a substitution of senses that can proceed in two (different) directions: on the one hand, “being” is “replaced” by becoming, the “what” is absorbed by the “how”, the what-is by the how-it-is; on the other hand – we would especially like to retain this thought – becoming is “replaced” by being, it is subsumed under the latter, it is understood as representing the ontic constitution (the what-is-in-itself) of the actual entity, and in this way it is posited as a “constant” or “invariable”.

Finally, we rediscover a metaphysical contamination in Derrida’s post-modernist thought, too, despite its claim to be a radical deconstruction of this form of philosophical reflection. Of course, what Derrida wants to accomplish is a very special type of ideative discourse, an ideative writing freed from any kind of prevailing conceptual centre, from whatever unique fundamental

¹ A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, New York, Free Press, 1969, p.28.

concept, as well as from conceptual identities *stricto sensu*. In the long run, this kind of writing proposes to identify itself with a meaning process in which the concepts, having lost their distinct determinations, refer to one another like in a play of mirrors and turn into components, considered as equal, of a way of thinking which, it is true, does not intend to impose anything, but which “does not mean to say anything” either or at least something that is a mere “question of understanding”. Derrida’s most intimate urgency is therefore to create a writing that means to bring out the formal play of the difference, of the conceptual oppositions, of the changes of systems and textual structures. But to say that writing should generate the practically unlimited series of differences is to relate the concept of difference (*différance*) to the “concept” of *différance* – a kind of higher “concept” that presupposes the former. Beyond doubt, Derrida takes the necessary precautions and therefore makes a laborious speculative effort in order to demonstrate that *différance* is not an immobile nucleus of potentialities, a fixed “original point” from which the “differences” proceed in a practically endless chain. On the contrary, as he argues, it is something else, namely a process, becoming, “a generative movement”, one “that consists in differentiating and in producing differences.” But Derrida does not hesitate to characterize this in terms like “common root” (“*la racine commune*”) of all conceptual differences¹. Doesn’t this syntagm express the older idea of being as that eternally-present whatness that makes possible all beings and constitutes itself into the principle of unity of all these?

Consequently, the fundamental senses assigned by contemporary thinking to the term metaphysics are the following: a) the onto-theological sense; b) the ontological sense proper (which concerns both the subjective being or subjectivity, and the suprasubjective being or the objective being); c) the paradoxical ontological sense, which implies the equation of being, and, finally, its substitution (at least as an intention) by becoming. But the presence of metaphysics in the contemporary world can be

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972, p.17.

assessed not only at the level of philosophical thinking, but also in other domains. From among these, we will refer to the domain of theoretical physics and that of political life. Doesn't the search for a unitary principle of accounting for the ensemble of physical phenomena in the universe, which are more or less accessible to our senses, reflect a spiritual demand that goes back to the older search for "One"? In this respect, doesn't Heisenberg's attempt to formulate "a unitary theory of matter", which could serve "as a basis for physics through its generality" (a theory that should contain, on the one hand, a limited number of "symmetry proportions of nature", and, on the other hand, the idea of causality seen, however, from the point of view of the theory of relativity) [see *The Law and the Structure of Matter*] proceed from a metaphysical conception of being? The answer can only be affirmative, and Heisenberg, as a matter of fact, admits this. Furthermore, how about some recent attempts to demonstrate that all forces of nature that affect elementary particles are but different manifestations of one and the same fundamental interaction? Don't they proceed from a metaphysical presumption, too? A philosopher of science such as Gerald Holton shares this opinion (see *On the Process of Scientific Invention during 'Revolutionary' Breakthroughs*) and we consider that he is right. We could select some convincing examples, even if not so well articulated, from other scientific domains, also. But let us think, in exchange, about how metaphysical thought influences political life. We believe that we should consider the conception which promoted the idea of a new world order as being indebted to metaphysics. This conception implies supranational institutions and government organizations, control and regulation mean to enforce the observance of the universal human rights, and so forth.

It follows that metaphysics is omnipresent in the world today or at least it is very close to being so. We cannot escape metaphysics, nor is it desirable that we could.

(Translated by Ștefan Oltean)