

ousia – Centre for the Philosophy and Theology of Being

Chair of Philosophy, Faculty of Theology, University of Lucerne

Philipp Blum, April 2018

Overall goal. To establish a vigorous collaborative research group centred around the chair of philosophy of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Lucerne, occupied by Giovanni Ventimiglia, working both historically and systematically on questions of being and anchored in the analytic tradition.

Aim. While analytic metaphysics, analytic philosophy of religion and analytic approaches to the history of philosophy have recently made much progress in the US and the UK, these disciplines are much less developed on the European Continent, particularly among members of underrepresented groups, esp. women. Current European research in these so-called ‘core’ areas of philosophy is neither as inclusive, visible nor dynamic as it should be. The general aim of the *ousia* is to change this unsatisfying situation.

A historic opportunity. Over the past fifteen years, analytic philosophy in Switzerland has been very successful in several respects: it has massively improved its position in international rankings, trained an unprecedented number of PhD students, many of whom have found very attractive positions abroad, and enabled the founding of many research centres of international renown. This flourishing of contemporary philosophy is now complemented by an equally unprecedented concentration of philosophers working on the Middle Ages.¹ This coincidence is very fortunate for at least two reasons. First, the methodology and ‘style’ of analytic philosophy is very closely modelled on scholastic arguments, with their back-and-forth of argument and counter-argument. Second, there are very many thematic interconnections, almost all of them entirely unexploited. While modern philosophy is a staple of historic references for systematic philosophers, and included in their curriculum, and ancient philosophy, in particular Aristotle’s, is fairly well known, medieval philosophy, comparatively lacking in introductory textbooks and accessible editions, is comparatively underexplored.

Research directions. The research focus of *ousia* is both both narrow and deep. It is narrow in its concentration on one single topic – being. This allows it to make effective use of its limited financial resources. It explores, however, this single topic in much depth, and from a large range of different perspectives:

theology ↔ philosophy As was customary in the Middle Ages, *ousia* considers itself located both within philosophy and theology proper (rather than at their respective borders), examining questions that are equally, though often differently, relevant for both disciplines at once. In addition, in the tradition of the great Islamic philosopher Avicenna / Ibn-Sīnā, *ousia* is characterized by its openness towards both the Islamic and Jewish traditions and will also seek to widen its investigation to include non-monotheistic non-monotheistic religions and theologies as well.

historical ↔ systematic *Ousia* seeks to pursue an approach that is at once both genuinely systematic and fully scholarly, instead of simply applying contemporary methods and concepts to historical texts or to use historical references just to ‘embellish’ systematic investigations. This approach is based in the convictions that (i) only properly historical work of exegesis and interpretation allows for the complexity that is direly needed to anchor, control and deepen systematic theorising and (ii) that self-standing cutting edge contemporary theorising is necessary in its own right to make progress that goes beyond the already quite sophisticated conceptual apparatus of analytic historians of philosophy.

analytic ↔ continental While securely anchored in the analytic style and methodology of philosophy, *ousia* will freely use texts, investigate theses and scrutinise arguments that are traditionally taken to belong to the ‘realm’ of continental philosophy. This allows to tap into rich intellectual and conceptual resources that make it possible to deviate from the well-trodden paths of mainstream analytic orthodoxy. In addition, we are convinced that a broad range of different approaches and methodologies is needed to properly understand historical mind-sets very different from our own.

Themes. We will take the following research topics as points of departure. We expect that these will change and evolve as a function of personal interests and funding possibilities. While we cannot hope to cover all of these themes, the length of the list provides substance to the claim that there are many interconnections between medieval philosophy and analytic metaphysics. In

1. There are seven professors at Swiss universities working on medieval philosophy – Laurent Cesalli (Geneva), Nadja Germann (Geneva), Tiziana Suarez-Nani (Fribourg), Peter Schulthess (Zürich), Giovanni Ventimiglia (Lucerne), Ueli Zahnd (Basel), Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen (Basel) –, at least four Swiss professors for medieval philosophy abroad – Alain de Libera (Paris, Collège de France), Dominik Perler (Berlin), Stephan Schmid (Hamburg), Leone Gazziero (Lille) –, and around ten post-docs working on medieval themes – Frédéric Goubier (Geneva), Magali Roques (Geneva), Damiano Costa (Fribourg), Nicolas D’Andrès (Fribourg), Olivier Ribordy (Fribourg), Valérie Cordonier (Fribourg), Alexander Brungs (Zürich), Vilem Mudroch (Zürich), Philipp Blum (Lucerne), Marco Lamanna (Lucerne).

line with the methodological precincts exposed above, all of these topics merit investigation from at least three complementary directions:

- (i) from a purely philosophical perspective, as problems in their own right;
- (i) in a theological perspective, as they concern God, if He exists, and insofar as they are relevant for human knowledge about Him, i.e. theology;
- (i) in a historical perspective, insofar as they raise interpretative and exegetical problems for deep and interesting thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle and the medievals.

God (/a/i)s Being. While classical Christian theology conceives God's being as a substance, influential contemporary theologians understand Him as a 'happening', as an event or even as a Whiteheadian process. Recent research into Aquinas' understanding of God's 'act of being' suggests that a reconciliation of these apparently opposed conceptions might be possible. Does being entail, consist in or reduce to some specifiable type of 'activity'? More generally: Is being itself dispositional, something that can be realised in different ways? Aristotle thought that the basic constituents of reality have a being that is not exhausted by what, and how, they actually are – but what is the ontological status of such fundamental potentiality?

Can we generalise this account even further, distinguishing with Heidegger more than 25 modes of being, or with Sartre just two? What exactly is the link between the claim that being consists in dispositions to exist in certain ways and the claim that being is inherently active? If we accept such modes of being, we must ask whether they are posterior to what they are modes of or whether being is irreducibly variegated, a 'family resemblance' concept without a common core.

While some such 'dynamical' views of being certainly has some intrinsic plausibility, as evidenced by the recent popularity of dispositionalism and 'power' ontologies, difficult questions remain untackled: What does it even mean for something existing to be 'directed', i.e. essentially characterised not just by a relation, but by a certain orientation as well? What (re-)combinatory principles hold of such beings? May teleological and 'functional' explanations really carve the world at its joints, and what would this mean?

The analogy of being. In what sense do we predicate "exists" of people, chairs, God, numbers and fictional creatures? What senses of being does Aristotle distinguish in *Met. A*? How are they related? Are some prior to others? How, if at all, do these ancient and medieval distinctions match up with contemporary talk about 'degrees' or 'modes' of being? Related questions concern the distinction between abstract and concrete and between causally interacting and merely 'intentional' objects – do they too exist in fundamentally different ways?

Of particular interest is the distinction – if, indeed, there is one at all – between (what are now called) the "is" of predication and the "is" of existence, a distinction in our post-Fregean world almost reflexively made, but which received a lot of critical discussion by Brentano and in the reist tradition.

A related, but also independent, interesting and under-researched question concerns the relation between 'ordinary' property exemplification and its modalised forms: is there, in addition to the "is" of predication, an "is" of essence, of necessity, of futurity? Can we understand "is necessarily", "is essentially" and "will be" as separate forms of copulae, in analogy to the syllogistic distinction between a-, o-, i- and e-predications, or are they, as is nowadays normally assumed, higher-order modifications of one basic a-modal and a-temporal 'is'?

Existentialism vs. essentialism. This question of the relative priority of essence and existence was widely debated in the Middle Ages, but is also of contemporary importance, in both its epistemological and ontological aspects. Can we understand that something is before understanding what it is for that thing to be (that thing)? And, conversely: how can there be such a thing as what it is for some thing to be if that thing does not already, and independently, exist?

Variants of these questions play important roles in discussions surrounding the status of *possibilia* (Plantinga, Fine), the question of necessitism (Williamson), how to understand claims of ontological dependency arising from singular reference theories (Kaplan, Kripke) and the question of the very possibility of future contingents (Prior, Tooley).

Despite the recent re-discovery of non-modal accounts of essence and attempts to take talk about 'real definitions' literally, the question remains undecided: on one reading of 'definition', a definition may, or even must, leave open the question of the existence or reference of what is defined; on a more traditional, Lockean or Leibnizian understanding, however, real definitions correspond to hidden natures, which must be natures of something.

Names, worldly and divine. What grounds our ability to 'reach out', refer and direct attention to objects by calling them names? How far does this ability of ours reach, and what are the conditions of its possibility? The nowadays standard 'causal chain' account connects naming to ostension and a related distinction between definite descriptions 'giving the meaning' and 'fixing the reference'. It is not clear, however, to what extent this account provides an analysis at all, nor whether it is general enough: What is it to 'point' to numbers, illnesses, institutions and fictional characters; what is it to point 'through' a description, using it to identify but not to individuate?

Both questions, I surmise, are profitably related to a perennial problem within Judeo-Christian theology: By what names can, should and do we call God? Can we call Him by any names at all? What is the difference between naming and describing God? The question whether "God" is secured a reference in virtue of the concept it expresses is much discussed with respect to the ontological argument and may serve to illustrate the difficulties arising from Kripke's distinction between 'de iure' and 'de facto' rigidity.

The issue is also relevant to the question of generalism: Does theism imply the incompleteness of any completely general

description of reality? Are “God”, “world” or “Big Bang” not just semantically but ontologically ‘singular’? Are they ‘arbitrary names’, stand-ins to anchor abstract reasoning about entirely qualitative aspects of reality?

Intentional being. Famously, Brentano characterised intentionality using the medieval terms of “intentional non-existence”. Though it has given rise to a busy industry trying to assimilate the ontological status of so-called ‘intentional objects’ to a number of other, supposedly better understood ontological categories, the medieval ancestry of our modern concept of intentionality has rarely been squarely addressed. What is it to be intentionally non-existent? Is it a way to be, a mode of being? Brentano, after all a specialist of Aristotle’s concept of existence, was conscious of plugging into a very rich tradition and it is to be hoped that not only his intentions, but the nature of the very phenomenon in question, may profitably be studied by following his example.

Degrees of being. Among the things there are, may some be said to be less or more real than others? Do some things have ‘diminished’ being, and what does this even mean? That some things are ‘lesser’ was a widely discussed idea in the Middle Ages, and of great importance to accounts of the relation between God and the world, including the problem of evil. If evil, or privations in general, have lesser being, then they may have their source in something else than the origin of all (full) being. Degrees of being have also been used to cash out the ontology of grounding relations, which are much discussed nowadays. Through this connection, they are also highly relevant, for example, for questions of reductionism and emergentism, the status of theoretical or ‘postulated’ entities, for social ontology and the metaphysics of race and gender. Independently of its application, the question whether there are degrees of being is also intrinsically interesting: What does it even mean to treat being as a determinable, as an intensive quality that comes in degrees? And even assuming sense can be made of the idea, what kind of structure is imposed by degrees of being? Do amounts of being vary in time; are they contingent or necessary; and do they vary in degrees of cognitive accessibility?

Senses of being. The Geach/Prior/Kenny tradition interprets the medievals as distinguishing between the operator- and the predicate-sense of “exists”; this distinction, if it can be given a metaphysical underpinning, may shed new light on many questions of meta-ontology, such as unrestricted quantification, quantifier variance, theoretical parsimony and ontological commitment.

With respect to the Quinean distinction of ideology and ontology, the predicate-sense seems to side with the first, the operator-sense with the latter. The operator-sense is, while the predicate-sense is not, or at least not obviously, vulnerable to the stock argument in favour of absolutely unrestricted quantification, namely that any restriction will have to predicate some property not universally exemplified in the domain. Similar considerations apply to variance: that of any two existential quantifiers one must be definable in terms of the other is much more plausible on the operator- than on the predicate-view. The two-senses theory may also serve to examine recent attempts to shift theoretical costs from ontology to ideology and to sever the Quinean tie between commitment and quantification.

Though it has a venerable tradition, the Quinean criterion of ontological commitment has largely fallen out of favour with contemporary metaphysicians: it is not clear, however, what can take its place, nor even whether any such ontological regimentation is necessary at all. Aside from a lot of waiving of hands, very little constructive has been said about the sense in which things to which we are not ontologically committed may still be said to be, or have being, or at least to be such-and-such. Medieval philosophy offers a very rich menu of candidates, which is waiting to be explored.

Being and number. What relation, if any, holds between existing and being countable? Orthodox quantification theory follows Frege’s Kantian-inspired move of construing both existential and numerical quantification as higher-order (in effect identifying the existential with the ‘at least one’ quantifier), though even here the details are murky. Even if first-order senses of existence are admitted, a simple step of existential generalisation allows us to infer from the existence of an F that there is at least one F , thus introducing number-words by something that has been called a ‘something-from-nothing’ transformation. For quite some time now, advocates of ‘stuff’ ontologies have criticised this step, but no clearly formulated metaphysical or logical alternative has emerged.

What is more, the foundational question – whether to be is to be one or some other definite number – has only rarely been squarely addressed. Its importance, however, extends to many, seemingly unconnected topics: from the argument from vagueness against unrestricted composition to the status of ‘completed’ infinities, stuff- and matter-ontologies, the ontology of numbers, neo-Fregeanism and the ontological proof of the existence of God.

Grounds of being. What does it mean for some entity to have its existence (rather than, say, its essence or its properties) grounded in something else? In what sense is a ground of some entity sufficient for its existence, in what sense necessary? It is surprising, given the recent surge of work on ‘grounding’, that these questions have barely been addressed. Recent work on the relation between grounding and causation primarily discusses the view that grounding is, or is profitably conceived on the model of, some kind of ‘super-causation’, but this seems to get the direction of the species/genus relation wrong: in an Aristotelian framework whether metaphysics, the science of being *qua* being investigates the grounds of things, it is much more natural to take both causation (together with essence, function and composition) to be a species or type of grounding. Despite a lot of recent interest in the principle of sufficient reason, the connection between groundedness and intelligibility has not yet been clearly made out – a question that are particularly pressing in a medieval context, where the self-sufficiency of God is often explained as being equivalent to His being a *causa sui*. Interesting connections also await to be traced between this question and two related ones, whether existence is ever, always, or just sometimes ‘brute’, and, prior to this, what being ‘brute’

would even mean. It may be held, for example, that anything in principle capable of being explained is a *some-such* (i.e. that every explanation is an answer to a question of the form ‘why is *a*, or are the *F*s, *G*?’) – explanations of existence would then commit us to something like the ‘predicate’-sense above. But perhaps there are explanations *of* things, as plausibly there may be said to be explanations *by* things.

The nature of universals. Are there only particulars, only universals, or are there both or neither? To what extent does the universal-particular distinction inform reality? Though usually presented by reference to Plato and Aristotle respectively, the distinction between the individual (particular, singular) and the universal (general) does not neatly match their positions, creating exegetical problems both for the medievals and their contemporary scholars, as well as leading to many puzzles that continue to plague metaphysics today. It is thus a worthwhile endeavour to take another look at this distinction.

Of particular interest is the relation of singular vs. universal to a different, though related distinction of Gottlob Frege’s, between concepts and objects. This distinction, more clearly modelled on logical grammar, not only underlies contemporary referential semantics, but is important for and presupposed by the very foundations of contemporary mathematics, not only on its so-called neo-Fregean reconstruction where numbers as objects are said to ‘emerge’ from a ‘recarving’ of equinumerosity statements about concepts, but also on the more standard axiomatic approach to the set-theoretical paradoxes, where sets, as objects, are ‘generated’ in stages that correspond to the logical complexity of the concepts that define them.

More generally, both universal/particular and concept/object have to be distinguished from many other related relations – exemplification, instantiation, predication, manifestation, realisation, being-of-a-type and aboutness, to name just a few. Only such a clarification can help us assess the prospects of metaphysical systems that, at least *prima facie*, eschew the dichotomy, such as process and trope ontologies. Here also medieval philosophy provides a toolbox of conceptual resources waiting to be put to good use.

Being and structure. In addition to the particular/universal distinction, is being structured in even further ways? More fundamentally, what does it mean for being to be structured? What is being structured by – higher-order properties and relations, ontological categories that do not ‘really’ exist or formal, non-relational ties?

One particular candidate for ontological structure is the determinate/determinable relation, where not just properties but other types of entities may be said to ‘realise’ others. Both the relation and its relata deserve further scrutiny, however. Do Porphyrian trees need to have lowest determinates, highest determinables, or could being be structured all the way up or down? Not only have these questions not often been addressed, but few intelligible answers have been given.

Despite the flourishing of many different types of ‘structuralisms’ in recent years, the question what it is for being to be structured deserves independent attention. It also allows for a new typology of different ways in which some ontology may be structuralist: it may ‘reduce structure to being’ by reifying it (postulating, e.g., states of affairs or other intrinsically structured entities), or it may conversely try to reduce being to structure, by claiming, e.g., that for some class of things, to be *is* for them to be related to each other.

Hylomorphism. Are some, or perhaps even all, entities internally structured by some inner principle of organisation that could be called a ‘form’? If so, what is that thing (‘matter’) that remains if we abstract, if only in thing, the form from a hylomorphic compound? In what sense is the particular thing ‘composed out’ of its matter and its form, by what, and in what way, is it individuated? What are forms and (pieces of) matter – is the form predicative (even if perhaps singular) and does it ‘include’ just the essential properties of some thing, or all of them? is the matter particular (even if perhaps not individual) and does it (perhaps generically) ‘enter into’ the form?

Recent work on hylomorphism has mostly focussed on its promise to make intelligible some kind of pluralism about parthood relations, on its potential to answer so-called ‘special composition questions’ and on its potential to offer a non-physicalist ontology of humans more amenable to extraneous demands motivated by arguments from epistemology and the philosophies of mind and perception. But it certainly deserves attention in its own right, if only because it was the dominant model for more than half of the lifetime of philosophy as we know it.

‘Orthodox’, i.e. Aristotelian, hylomorphism moreover seems to offer some theoretical advantages over its somewhat ‘stripped-down’ descendants. Contrary to most, if not all, contemporary versions, Aristotle and his medieval exegetes would not have considered *Lumpl*, the piece of bronze shaped into a human form, the matter of the statue; it would rather have received a form of its own, forming an independent hylomorphic compound subsequently ‘providing the matter for’ the statue. The coming-to-be of the statue, and the resulting exemplification of new modal and temporal persistence conditions, is thus not explained as a result of the exemplification of a property (the form) by the pre-existing ‘form-less’ particular, but rather by the final cause responsible for the transformation of the two matter-sharing particulars into one another.

The bestiary of entities. The question of being, what it means to exist, is obviously highly relevant to the question what exists. Even in the absence of a criterion, it is helpful to distinguish two opposing tendencies. Often motivated by considerations of parsimony, some are generally skeptical about existence claims and try to restrict these claims to entities they consider unproblematic. Such restrictions, when cashed out in non-circular terms, are independently problematic: sometimes, it is not clear (nor, for that matter, *a priori*) whether anything satisfies these criteria. Even when the spectre of metaphysical nihilism – the view that really there is nothing – is avoided, moreover and more importantly, it is often unclear why such characteristics (roughly modelled on Aristotelian substance-hood) should be correlated with, or even essential to *existence*.

An opposite tendency is more generous, holding that existence comes cheap. How, however, are we then to make the relevant distinctions and spell out a sense of priority among the different categories? Plenitudinism, at least *prima facie*, seems to go

against some common sense principles like that there cannot be two distinct objects occupying the same spacetime region or that there is no systematic causal overdetermination. How are such theoretical ‘costs’ to be weighted against the advantages, if there are any, of ‘allowing’ such entities? How is plenitudinism to be reconciled with more general, equally plausible principles concerning existence, as e.g. the view that existence assertions, concerning matters of fact, are neither analytic nor a priori knowable? Again, medieval philosophy offers a lot of options here, starting from roughly Aristotelian plenitudinism and progressively restricting it.

Existence, presence, persistence. What relation of metaphysical priority, if any, is there between being and being-at-a-time, or being-for-some-time? How are we to understand, for temporal entities, the connection between their existence and their existing now, then, or in the future?

Both within mainstream contemporary metaphysics and in analytic approaches to the history of philosophy, distinctions between manners of persistence and entities (objects, events, processes, states) essentially characterised by them have played important roles. Until now, however, these demarcations suffer from insufficient clarity. Very little work has been done, e.g., on the question how temporally extended things persist through time, i.e. in virtue of what their existence at one time is (at least partly) grounded in their existence at an earlier time, and whether this question receives different answers for particulars, events and processes. This question, largely ignored today, concerning becoming and change was at the heart of medieval ontological investigation.

Eternity and timelessness. if there is a robust first-order sense of “is”, as many theorists now hold, its connection to temporal qualifications has yet to be explored: if for Socrates to be is for him to be real, to live at certain times and not others, to undergo change and to be causally active, then what understanding, if any, do we have of God’s eternal being? Drawing on recent discussions of the (non-)fundamentality of time in quantum field theory, the project aims to articulate a new conception of the timelessness of God.

In addition to forms of temporal existence, is there a type of existence – atemporal or omnitemporal being – that would either be unchanging or be even conceptually incompatible with change? Both as a limit case, and in its own right, eternity is deeply puzzling, particularly because it has been attributed to such diverse entities as numbers, propositions, thoughts, but also dynamical laws, special types of fields, prime matter, the universe, on some interpretations of quantum mechanics, and of course also God. If these things are all eternal, are they so in the same sense?

Is being eternal incompatible with coming into being or may, for instance, propositions be eternal despite being created at a particular point in time? If so, are they artifacts like symphonies that, at least on some accounts, are created or does their coming into being consist in their being discovered?

Is eternity correctly understood on the model of necessity, as is normally done? Can we infer existence, or existence-at-a-time from eternity in roughly the way we infer actuality from necessity? Eternal subjects, such as a Christian God and Cartesian souls, raise special problems: how are we to understand their capacity for sequential thought, how to conceptualise their ability to take conditional decisions (decisions depending, e.g., on some free choice of an agent), how to articulate the link between their (unchanging) cognition and its (changing) contents?

Transcendentals. The medieval doctrine of transcendental properties, of which being, unity and multiplicity are just three, has not yet been connected to contemporary criticism of the Frege/Quine paradigm of understanding being by the existential quantifier. A neo-Aristotelian view of the connection between the “is” of predication and the “is” of existence may shed light on other issues as well, from the Brentanian concept of intentional non-existence to Williamson’s necessitism.

In what sense is *being* or *existence* a property, if it is one at all? Are there, in addition to properties that characterise their bearers, other *passiones entis* that specify without characterising? Conversely, what does it mean to say that existence is not a predicable or attribute? Not even in the case of its most famous proponent, Kant, is it clear what it means to say that ‘existence is not a predicate’, nor really what “Dasein” stands for in the table of the categories. How can we say that to postulate some entity, say Pegasus, is automatically to posit it *as existing* while denying that “Pegasus exists” describes it as being one way or other?

In the Middle Ages, such questions were asked with respect to all so-called ‘transcendentals’, universal attributes of being as such. What do things that are one, exist, are good or are true have in common? How do they differ, in the way they ‘apply to’ their particulars, from ‘thick’, ‘material’, contingent and accidental properties, such as being disgraceful, heavy, white and bipedal? Medieval texts offer a rich source of inspiration, not just for the theories of formal or thin concepts, of ontological categories and of classification in general, but are highly relevant for more ‘specialised’ topics as well, such as the buckpassing theory of value, the definition of presentism, the status of objects of beliefs and of truthbearers, the characterisation of omnipotence and ‘bringing it about’ etc.

Pantheism and panentheism. Understanding God or *tian* as the “outpouring of being” or even as identical with it is explanatory only to the extent we have some idea what being is. Being in this sense – the universe – is essentially maximal, a totality that not only includes everything there is but also excludes everything else. Recent discussions in metaphysics (eg. of monism) and the philosophy of mind (eg. of causal closure arguments) have problematised this notion, but no connections to the religious sphere have yet been drawn.