EXISTENTIAL ONTOLOGY: TOWARDS A FIRST PHILOSOPHY OF MODES OF EXISTENCE

Christian Frigerio

ABSTRACT: The concept of "mode of existence" has recently experienced a great diffusion in both continental and analytic philosophy. However, philosophers do not pay much attention to the concept of mode of existence itself. This paper proposes to establish a branch of ontology entirely devoted to clarifying the use of such a concept. We will begin by showing how Husserl's framework for addressing the heterogeneity of being, based on the distinction between material and formal ontology, participates in two ideas that have defined the tradition of the univocity of being in Western philosophy: the decision in favor of identity in the "ontological tension" between conceiving of being in terms of identity or in terms of difference, left as a legacy of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*; and the correlative processes of the "logicization of being" and the "essentialization of existence", that allowed Duns Scotus to proclaim that the *concept* of being is univocal. Then, we follow Roman Ingarden in claiming that "existential ontology" should be added to Husserl's bifurcation of formal and material ontology: existential ontology is a formal inquiry into the very meaning of there being modes of existence, which, unlike Husserl's formal ontology, does not subject all existence to the mode of logic. The main features of existential ontology are outlined, and some of the questions it must face are mentioned. Finally, an example of how it should work is given by addressing the question of the "existential difference" between being and existence. The idea of existential ontology that should emerge is that of a discipline that provides a "diplomatic" framework in which different understandings of modes of existence can be confronted and debated.

KEYWORDS: Modes of existence; Bruno latour; Etienne souriau; Formal ontology; Edmund Husserl; Roman Ingarden; Pluralism; Univocity of being; Gilles Deleuze; Duns Scotus

"THERE ARE MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH THAN ARE DREAMT OF IN YOUR PHILOSOPHY": ON EXISTENTIAL PLURALISM

> Does thought exist, in itself and through itself? Does matter exist and in the same manner? Does God exist? Did Hamlet, the *Primavera*, Peer Gynt exist, do they exist, and in what sense? Do the square roots of negative numbers exist? Does the blue rose exist? Is it enough to respond to each of these questions (in the affirmative, in the negative, or in whatever way—and already this is not so simple)? Certainly not. By their very accumulation, these questions pose another, vaster question, which contains them all: are there several manners of existing? Is the "to exist" multiple, that is, not contained within the individuals in which it is actualized and invested, but rather contained in its types?[1]

It was with these questions that Étienne Souriau, in 1943, introduced the subject of a book that was soon to be forgotten. The subject was *existential pluralism*, or *the multiplicity of modes of existence* (which Souriau distinguished from *ontic* pluralism, which focuses on whether there is only one thing, like Spinoza's substance, or many things). Thanks largely to Bruno Latour and his 2012 book *An inquiry into modes of existence*,[2] existential pluralism seems to be back *à la mode* lately, as signaled by the proliferation of texts about "modes of existence".

This is not to say that earlier philosophy was blind to the heterogeneity of our experience. On the contrary, the view that existence comes in many flavors was suggested by Aristotle's dictum that "being is said in many ways" (*Met.* 1003a32). Interacting with the semantic concerns of medieval philosophers, the doctrine that being is said in many ways was canonized, thanks to Thomas Aquinas, as the doctrine of "analogy". Analogy has always been a complex corpus of doctrines rather than a well-established thesis[3]; roughly, it can be defined as the position that there is no single sense in which being is said, but that all its

---

[1] Étienne Souriau, *The different modes of existence*, trans. E. Beranek & T. Howles, Univocal, Minneapolis, 2015, p. 97.

[2] Bruno Latour, *An inquiry into modes of existence: an anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. C. Porter, Harvard UP, Cambridge, 2013.

[3] Jean-François Courtine, *Inventio analogiae : Métaphysique et ontothéologie*, Vrin, Paris, 2005; Emanuele Mariani, *Nient'altro che l'essere: ricerche sull'analogia e la tradizione aristotelica della fenomenologia*, ETS, Pisa, 2012.

meanings bear some relation to each other.

Analogy became something of a dogma after Aquinas, because the idea of difference-in-relation it conveyed made it possible to account for both the diversity of the divine and the created, and the possibility of knowing God. For this reason, most Western philosophers have endorsed some version of existential pluralism: "In contemporary analytic metaphysics, the by far dominant view is that being is unitary. But in the philosophical tradition that stems from Plato… there have been few, if any, proponents of the view that being is unitary".[4] Let us read Souriau's inventory of existential pluralisms: philosophers have distinguished "actual being and potential being; explicit, implicit, and complicit existences; modes of aseity and abaliety, of ipseity and alterity; existing formally, objectively, eminently; existence *an sich*, *für sich*, *bei sich* (Hegel); primary immediate existence (*Urerlebnis*) or mediate existence of appraised reality (Reininger); cognitive-real existence and emotive-imaginary existence, the latter being divisible into affective and volitional existence (H. Maier); *Dasein*, *Zuhandensein*, *Vorhandensein*, etc. (Heidegger)".[5] Kris McDaniel gives further examples with Descartes and Leibniz, with Lotze and Moore, with Susan Stebbing and Edith Stein. This is proof enough that the question of modes of existence has been "latent at every important stage in the history of Western thought".[6]

But this is only half of the story. Gilles Deleuze famously claimed that "there has only ever been one ontological proposition: Being is univocal".[7] This may be a bit of an exaggeration, but it is true that most modern ontology rests on the assumption of the univocity of being: this follows from Aristotle's demand for a *first philosophy* concerned with being *qua* being. The doctrine of univocity is closely associated with the name of Duns Scotus, "the only significant dissidence" within the "unanimous consent in favor of an extreme plurality of modes of existence" in the Middle Ages.[8] Univocity is the position that, contrary to Aristotle, being is

---

[4] Kris McDaniel, *The fragmentation of being*, Oxford UP, Oxford, 2017, p. 2.

[5] Souriau, *The different modes of existence*, pp. 103-4.

[6] Jamil Alioui, *L'occasion d'un penser collectif : Une lecture philosophique de l'*Enquête *de Bruno Latour*. Mémoire de maîtrise universitaire ès lettres, Université de Lausanne, 2016, https://www.academia.edu/37434649/Loccasion_dun_penser_collectif_Une_lecture_philosophique_de_lEnqu%C3%AAte_de_Bruno_Latour (accessed 10/2/2024), p. 26.

[7] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*, trans. P. Patton, Columbia UP, New York, 1994, p. 35.

[8] Souriau, *The different modes of existence*, p. 104.

said in a single way of everything that is. Scotus was probably the first to address the fact that Aristotle's demand for a first philosophy of being as being was at odds with his view of being as equivocal. It was a demand for intelligibility that led Scotus to assert that there is no difference between God and creatures when it comes to being. All in all, it seems that the *de facto* existential pluralism of most Western philosophers was at odds with the univocal conception of being on which their ontology was based.

For this reason, it is only since the end of the nineteenth century that existential pluralism has been directly addressed. Broadly speaking, we can distinguish *three traditions* in which existential pluralism (or its negation) has been made a central issue. The first is analytic ontology, arguably the only current that has resolutely taken univocity to its ultimate consequences. The problem of the nonexistents, and the relations – of difference, inclusion, identity… – between being and existence, have been constant preoccupations which have determined many developments in analytic philosophy. The analytic "establishment", dominant since Russell's response to Meinong and confirmed by W.V.O. Quine, holds that being is strictly univocal.[9] Byron Simmons summarizes the "Quinean establishment" of analytic univocism in three theses: "*The Monistic Thesis*: being is unitary. *The Equivalence Thesis*: being is the same as existence. *The Neo-Quinean Thesis*: being is perspicuously expressed by particular – or existential – quantifier expressions".[10] Like any establishment, the Quinean one has its critics. The mavericks in analytic ontology are mainly represented by Meinong's followers,[11] who defend a form of pluralism in which being is broader than (actual, spatiotemporal) existence; but recently some have begun to look at modes of existence with independent eyes: Jason Turner wrote in 2010 that "ontological pluralism has few friends and many foes – foes who think it untenable, perhaps unthinkable, and almost certainly devastatingly refuted".[12] A few years later,

---

[9] Bertrand Russell, "On denoting", *Mind*, 14, 1905, pp. 479-93; W.V.O. Quine, "On what there is", *The Review of Metaphysics* 2(5), 1948, pp. 21-38.

[10] Byron Patrick Simmons, *The nature of being*, PhD thesis, Syracuse Univ., 2019, https://www.proquest.com/docview/ 2355989756/fulltextPDF/BFE92EAF41C34AC5PQ/1?accountid=12459&sourcetype=Dissertations%20& %20Theses (accessed 29/2/2024), p. 3.

[11] Francesco Berto, *Existence as a real property: the ontology of Meinongianism*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2013.

[12] Jason Turner, "Ontological pluralism", *Journal of Philosophy* 107(1), 2010, pp. 5-34, p. 34.

returning to the same subject, he noted that "ontological pluralism is certainly in a much better position today than it was a decade ago. Its rehabilitation by appeal to elite quantifiers has helped resurrect it from the positivist's graveyard. But that's not to say it has come to dominate the metaphysical scene. The view remains niche, with detractors eager to argue against it".[13] Along with Turner, philosophers such as Kris McDaniel, Byron Simmons and Bradley Rettler[14] are working to rehabilitate existential pluralism in the ranks of analytic philosophy.

The second tradition is phenomenology. In fact, contemporary philosophies of modes of existence have their origins in Brentano's idea that modes of being are correlated with modes of representation. The whole of Husserl's phenomenology since the *Logical Investigations* is based on this premise. It is thanks to phenomenology that the multivocity of being became of interest to French anti-phenomenologists such as Souriau or Gilbert Simondon.[15] As we will see, the basic insight of Husserl's project of "regionalizing ontology" could be read as a renewal of Aristotle's "first philosophy", which, like it, contains a tension between the recognition of the plurality of modes of existence, expressed by the fragmentation of objects into many "regions", and the demand for generality and grounding, conveyed by the final return to "formal ontology".

Finally, there is a kind of *interstitial* tradition that is part of continental philosophy while remaining outside phenomenology. Recently, attention has been drawn to this subterranean line of thought, which Pierre Montebello calls *l'autre métaphysique* and Rocco Ronchi calls *canone minore*.[16] Montebello and Ronchi share Bergson as their main philosophical referent; to the philosopher of *durée*, Montebello adds Ravaisson, Tarde and Nietzsche, while Ronchi adds Whitehead, Deleuze and Giovanni Gentile. What these philosophers have in common is a certain neglect of Kant's Copernican revolution, thus keeping speculation about the structure of the world as the main aim of philosophy. While both Montebello and Ronchi see their genealogies as centered on univocity,

---

[13] Jason Turner, "Recent work on ontological pluralism", in James Miller & Rikki Bliss (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphysics*, Routledge, London, 2019, pp. 1-18, p. 12.

[14] Bradley Rettler, "Ways of thinking about ways of being", *Analysis* 80(4), 2020, pp. 712-22.

[15] Henning Schmidgen, "Mode d'existence: memoirs of a concept", in Bruno Latour & Christophe Leclercq (eds.), *Reset modernity!*, MIT, Cambridge, 2016, pp. 320-7.

[16] Pierre Montebello, *L'autre métaphysique*, Presses du Réel, Paris, 2015; Rocco Ronchi, *Il canone minore: verso una filosofia della natura*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2017.

there is a similar tradition for modes of existence. Following Bruno Latour, who placed the philosophy of modes of existence that he drew from Souriau "in the same neighborhood as the pragmatism of James and the speculative philosophy of Whitehead",[17] we can call the *speculative-pragmatic* tradition of modes of existence the philosophical lineage running from William James to Latour, via Souriau and Simondon. Still other philosophers could be included in the speculative-pragmatic tradition of modes of existence – C.S. Peirce, F.H. Bradley, A.N. Whitehead and Isabelle Stengers, to name but a few.

One of the aims of this paper is to provide the means to overcome, as far as possible, the divide between these traditions of philosophies of modes of existence. The neglect of each other by the continental and analytic traditions, and the divergence in language, presuppositions and problems, have created two watertight echo chambers that make it difficult to take each other seriously, let alone understand each other. The question of modes of existence is one of the few they share, but mutual commensurability remains a problem.[18] It is to be hoped that by addressing this issue we can realize Giorgio Agamben's idea that "the dispute between the philosophy improperly defined as continental and analytic philosophy has its roots in this ambiguity [regarding the nature of modes] and could therefore only be resolved on the basis of a rethinking of the theory of modes and categories of modality".[19]

To do this, we need to be clear about what it means that there are modes of existence in the first place. As a fact (and with the significant exception of Quine and his followers), philosophers of modes of existence "do not dedicate much

---

[17] Bruno Latour, "Reflections on Étienne Souriau's *Les différents modes d'existence*", in Levi Bryant, Graham Harman & Nick Srnicek, *The speculative turn: continental materialism and realism*, re.press, London, 2011, pp. 304-333, p. 308. See also Antoine Hennion, "From ANT to pragmatism: a journey with Bruno Latour at the CSI", *New Literary History* 47(2/3), 2016, pp. 289-308; Didier Debaise, "La terre des modernes : Le sens du pragmatisme de Bruno Latour", *Pragmata: Revue d'Études Pragmatistes* 6, 2023, pp. 408-24.

[18] In an important 2006 collection of analytic papers entitled precisely *Modes of existence* (Andrea Bottani & Richard Davies (eds.), *Modes of existence: papers in ontology and philosophical logic*, Ontos, Frankfurt, 2006), the names of James, Souriau, Simondon and Latour are unsurprisingly absent. When analytic and continental philosophers read each other, things get even worse: in a one-star review of Latour's *Inquiry*, the prominent French analytic philosopher Frédéric Nef defined the book as "une tromperie de A à Z. Il est de plus difficile à utiliser et assez ennuyeux à lire (fouillis, pas systématique). L'auteur semble ignorer tout de l'ontologie moderne. De plus assez arrogant. Bref beaucoup de vices intellectuels" (https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/dp/2707173479, accessed 6/2/2024).

[19] Giorgio Agamben, *L'uso dei corpi*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza, 2014, p. 210.

attention to the concept of a 'mode of existence' itself"[20]; they are scarcely reflective about what they mean when they say that being is said in many ways. This is because they often start from material (in Husserl's sense) concerns about particular modes of existence: Souriau was concerned with the ontology of the work of art, Simondon with that of technical objects, Latour with the categories that could replace Nature and Culture in order to begin diplomatic activities with nonmodern collectives, etc. The idea of mode of existence itself is often taken up at an implicit level and used as a means of better carrying out these material investigations. What is lacking is a philosophical inquiry into the very idea that modes of existence are plural, into their constitution and their differences, their articulation and their detection.

We argue that Husserl's framework, which regionalizes ontology against the background of a "formal" ontology common to all regions and which still represents the standard attempt to approach modes of being in both analytic and continental philosophy, is an ill-conceived attempt to do this. Husserl's project retains a tension between univocity and existential pluralism that can be traced back to two tenets it inherits from the earlier tradition: the idea that the nature of being must be conceived in terms of self-identity and that any first philosophy must be centered on "being as being"; and the idea that, for such a philosophy to be possible, the heterogeneity of being must be subjected to the univocity *of its concept*. Because of these, Husserl's idea of a formal ontology ends up adding yet another material ontology, different from the others only in terms of generality, rather than arriving at a truly formal understanding of what the plurality of modes of existence means.

This paper will sketch a genealogy of the two assumptions passed down from the tradition of univocity to Husserl and beyond and will make the case for a *first philosophy of modes of existence* that gives up both, vindicating Aristotle's demand while respecting the heterogeneity of what is experienced. Following Roman Ingarden's reworking of Husserl, this kind of philosophy will be called *existential ontology*, i.e. *an inquiry into the concept of mode of existence itself*. Existential ontology champions a different understanding from Husserl of what it is required for a discipline to be "formal": rather than a mere "generality" that is unduly supposed

[20] Markus Gabriel, *Fields of sense: a new realist ontology*, Edinburgh UP, Edinburgh, 2015, p. 172.

to cover all modes, it must directly address the very fact that being is regionalized and that existence comes in modes. Existential ontology argues that the nature of modes must be explored by taking *modal differences*, differences between modes of existence considered in their formal aspects, as the object of first philosophy in a new key.

Existential ontology, a formal investigation of the concept of mode of existence itself, is, in Souriau's words, "the only kind of ontology that can constitute a truly positive discipline".[21] We will expose the assumptions that have prevented this approach from emerging until recently, in order to pave the way for its collective implementation. First, we will show that it was an "ontological decision" rather than a theoretical necessity that led from Aristotle's call for a first philosophy to the establishment of the univocity of being, and that this decision can be reversed by centering first philosophy on "being-as-other", on being as it is given through modes of existence, rather than on being-as-being. Then the pervasiveness of the "logicization of being", the reduction of the concreteness of being to the univocal abstractness of its concept, will be revealed, together with the necessity of overcoming it in favor of a kind of formal reflection on modal differences, starting from a "radical empiricism" that takes into account the heterogeneity of the concrete. On this basis, we propose to replace Husserl's formal ontology with existential ontology.

This paper does not aim to develop a system; on the contrary, it will keep its positive claims to a minimum. What it aims to do is to define something like a "research program" for further investigation. This is why a large number of questions that an existential ontology should address will be mentioned and left unanswered. Only one question will be worked out as an example of how existential ontology should function: this is the question of the relationships between being, non-being, and existence, three concepts whose meanings have shifted greatly throughout history. Although I do not claim that the solution I propose – that of abolishing the "existential difference" between being and existence, of treating these terms as synonymous and "non-being" as denoting a *different* mode of existence from the one initially envisaged – is the only way to ground existential ontology, I do claim that it allows one to start the inquiry with

---

[21] Étienne Souriau, *Avoir une âme : Essai sur les existences virtuelles*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1938, p. 29.

a minimum of presuppositions, and thus to better respect the demand placed on existential ontology *not to tell in advance* about modes of existence.

Before moving on, one might ask why we should care about the renewal of "first philosophy". The age of foundational philosophies is long past, and one of the conditions for the emergence of contemporary philosophies of modes of existence is the "ontological turn" in anthropology. Anthropology becomes ontological when it takes seriously the modes of existence with which other collectives populate the world: "the roots of human diversity must be sought at [the level] of the differences between the basic inferences humans draw about the kinds of beings that populate the world and the way these beings are linked to one another"[22]; "By revealing the many ways of worldmaking, the ontological turn forces us to accept the reality of ontological pluralism, of pluralities of premises and practices, and the need to allow different ways of being, different modes of existence, the right to formulate *in their own terms* how they might interact with others".[23] The demand to address other collectives in their own terms rather than in ours seems to dispense with any claim to a first philosophy as a ground for the study of modes of existence. This is why our adoption of the phrase "first philosophy" should be read with an almost ironic tone: despite its ambition to replace Husserl's "formal ontology" as the common background of philosophies of modes of existence, existential ontology is actually a philosophy that comes *last*. Once the ontological decision has been made to conceive of being in terms of self-identity, it is only after the long journey of Western philosophy that existential ontology becomes possible. The only justification for such an ambitious phrase as "first philosophy" is that existential ontology, while remaining part of the history of Western philosophy, should allow it to confront all kinds of cosmologies on a fairly equal footing. That is its ultimate ambition.

---

[22] Philippe Descola, *The composition of worlds: interviews with Pierre Charbonnier*, trans. N. Vinsonneau & J. Magidof, Polity, Cambridge, 2024, p. 111.

[23] Baptiste Gille, "Ordering what is: the political implications of ontological knowledge", in Pierre Charbonnier, Gildas Salmon & Peter Skafish (eds.), *Comparative metaphysics. ontology after anthropology*, Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2017, pp. 301-26, p. 322.

ARE WE SUCH STUFF AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON? FROM BEING-AS-BEING TO BEING-AS-OTHER

Let us begin with Aristotle. One of the main ambitions of the texts collected in the *Metaphysics* was to establish the possibility of a *first philosophy*, understood as a *science of being-as-being*. Here lies one of the greatest hermeneutical problems in the history of philosophy: how is a science of being as being possible if being is not a genus?[24] By proclaiming that being is said in many ways, Aristotle provided the catchphrase of philosophies of modes of existence; by proclaiming the need for a science of being as being, he ran counter to this claim. What matters to us is that the *Metaphysics* left as its legacy a *tension between identity and difference* as the landmark of the philosophy of being. In Aristotle and his readers, "the multiplication of the senses of being, its equivocality, works against the constitution of metaphysics as a science, because there is no science except of the univocal".[25] Let us call this the *ontological tension*.

Duns Scotus's primary concern in establishing the univocity of being was to secure the possibility of knowing God. Only if being is univocally conceived, only if it is the same from created substances all the way to God, can we hope to gain some knowledge of it. Analogy was not enough to mitigate this dispersion; univocity was Scotus's way of finding a more rigorous ground for metaphysics (and theology) as a science. The need for intelligibility led to the ontological decision to sacrifice the multiplicity of modes of existence to the demands of a first philosophy.

Following Scotus, most ontologies will resolve the ontological tension resolutely in favor of the identity pole. Univocity eventually became the standard view. Occam, for instance, endorsed univocity while remodeling it on nominalism[26]; even among Thomists who contested it, univocity became the common background against which doctrines of analogy were developed.[27] Although Suarez proposed to reconcile Aquinas and Scotus, his systematization of scholasticism (and the subsequent establishment of ontology in the modern

---

[24] Pierre Aubenque, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote : essai sur la problématique aristotélicienne*, PUF, Paris, 1972.

[25] Olivier Boulnois, *Être et représentation : une généalogie de la métaphysique moderne à l'époque de Duns Scot*, PUF, Paris, 1999, p. 12.

[26] Peter Simons, "Categories and ways of being", *Reports on Philosophy* 10, 1986, pp. 89-104.

[27] Olivier Boulnois, "La destruction de l'analogie et l'instauration de la métaphysique", in Duns Scot, *Sur la connassance de Dieu et l'univocié de l'étant*, Épiméthée, Paris, PUF, 1988, pp. 11-81.

sense) was based on a highly unequal balance between "objective" concept and "real" analogy, which decided the definitive triumph of univocity.[28] The reduction of being to its univocal concept was completed by Wolff, and thus underpins Kant's reworking of the concepts of being and existence. It is the same view that Frege will take up and that will provide the standard framework of analytic ontology from Russell to van Inwagen via Quine: the "Kant-Frege-Russell view of existence"[29] is the result of Scotus's establishment of the univocity of being.

Analytic ontology was the only current to take univocity to its ultimate consequences, but sensitivity to this demand was widespread. All in all, it seems that Deleuze's claim that the univocity of being has always been the only ontological proposition is not unjustified. However, this was done with little regard for the heterogeneity of our experience of the world, which most philosophers still admitted.[30] The centering of ontology around univocity left this heterogeneity unexplained. A neat division between univocal being and multifarious experience remained as a vestige of the ontological tension inherited from Aristotle. Univocity was a requirement of thought; existential pluralism survived as a phenomenological given limited to "appearance".

Our bet will be on the possibility that Scotus's ontological decision in favor of identity and univocity can be reversed while respecting Aristotle's original demand; on the possibility, that is, of developing a consistent "first philosophy" that respects existential pluralism by privileging the *difference* pole of the ontological tension. For this to be possible, the requirement that a unified object be found for such a philosophy must be made compatible with the apparent multivocity of being. This can be done by *taking the difference between modes of existence itself as our object*. We will give up conceptions of being in terms of identity that are incompatible with our experience of the world. Instead of being-as-being, we

---

[28] Jean-François Courtine, *Suarez et le système de la métaphysique*. PUF, Paris, 1990.

[29] David Wiggins, "The Kant-Frege-Russell view of existence", in W. Sinnott-Armstrong (ed.), *Modality, morality, and belief: essays in honor of Ruth Barcan Marcus*, Cambridge UP, New York, pp. 93-113.

[30] Scotus himself did not simply refute analogy; on the contrary, it is possible to find in his work a precise theorization of it (Olivier Boulnois, "Duns Scot, théoricien de l'analogie de l'être," in Ludger Honnefelder, Rega Wood, and Mechthild Dreyer (eds.), *John Duns Scotus: metaphysics and ethics*, Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 53, Brill, Leiden, 1996, pp. 293–315), which is held valid for both the fields of physics and metaphysics.

embrace *being-as-other*.

Being-as-other is a phrase coined by Bruno Latour. In speaking of being-as-other, Latour means to identify modes of existence with the ways in which actors "pass through", relate to and affect each other. We can disentangle being-as-other from Latour's actor-network understanding of it by defining being-as-other as the view that being must be understood primarily as a process of *self-differentiation*, and that this differentiation is primarily a *modal* differentiation. There is no "bare being" or "being in itself" to which a "mode of being" is posthumously attached. Being is modified from the beginning, it can never be identical with itself, because it has no "itself" to be identical with. Since being is only in its modes, there is no being "in general", but there remains the possibility of a study of "being itself" by looking at the "formal" aspect of the differences between modes. The only univocity lies in this formal aspect of differences between modes; *being is said univocally only of modal differences*. This is why the study of modes of existence is the same as the study of being itself. Once being has been reconceptualized in this way, first philosophy finally has a unified object that does not require the abandonment of existential pluralism. *The object of first philosophy should be formally conceived modal differences*, the very relations of difference between modes of existence.

The philosopher, says Latour, parodying Heidegger, is not the shepherd of being, but *the shepherd of modes of existence*.[31] To ask what being is, is to ask what it means that there are differences between modes of existence. This idea is not revolutionary in itself. Gilbert Ryle wrote: "not only is it the case that category-propositions (namely assertions that terms belong to certain categories or types), are always philosopher's propositions, but, I believe, the converse is also true".[32] The unity of a metaphysics of modes of existence is thus to be found in "the meeting-place of all type-ambiguities",[33] since the unity displayed by a "phenomenology of infelicity"[34] (the same "infelicity" that, according to Latour, results from the confusion of modes of existence) makes it possible to find a unified object for philosophy precisely in a differential relation. Manley Thompson was

---

[31] Bruno Latour, *How to inhabit the Earth: interviews with Nicolas Truong*, trans. Julie Rose, Polity, London, 2023.

[32] Gilbert Ryle, "Categories", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 38, 1938, pp. 189-206, p. 189.

[33] *Ivi*, p. 202.

[34] Ofra Magidor, *Category mistakes*, Oxford UP, Oxford, 2013, p. 2.

clear that category differences may well be the only proper object of philosophy:

> Traditionally, category differences have been frequently regarded as special territory for philosophy, while various specific differences have been made the concern of various sciences. The reason for this parceling out of problems seems clear enough. The members of a given genus constitute the subject matter of a given inquiry, and specific differences among these members provide problems to be accounted for by the inquiry. But since category differences are precisely those which do not hold between the members of one genus rather than another, the problems to which they give rise cannot be assigned to an inquiry which claims only the members of a given genus as its subject matter. Such problems, then, so the argument runs, must be assigned to philosophy.[35]

The synthetic ambitions of philosophy are due less to its ability to hold together divergent disciplines than to the fact that its object is situated precisely *between* those of particular "regional" ontologies, and that this "between" is understood as a relation of difference between modes of existence. If we install ourselves directly in such a difference, it is possible to provide ontology with a new, unified object precisely in a relation of difference, thus reviving Aristotle's idea of a first philosophy while respecting the evidence of existential pluralism.

UNIVOCITY IS BEING-AS-CONCEPT: THE LOGICIZATION OF BEING

The decision in favor of identity was the first step in determining the displacement of existential pluralism. There is a second step, which also follows from Scotus's establishment of univocity. We might call this the *logicization of being*. In order to ignore the apparent multivocity of being and to establish its univocity, Scotus had to reduce being to its *concept*. The question moves from metaphysics to logic: "the primacy of the concept leads to moving the philosophical decision from metaphysics to *noetics* and *logic*: it is through the concept and not in the things themselves that the concept of being is univocal".[36] The object of first philosophy is actually *being-as-being-logical*. This is a crucial point: since Aristotle "the concept

---

[35] Manley Thompson, "On category differences", *The Philosophical Review*, 66(4), 1957, pp. 486-508, p. 488.

[36] Boulnois, *Être et représentation*, p. 14.

of mode… brings with it an ambiguity, so that, in the history of Western philosophy, it presents itself sometimes as a logical concept (we prefer to speak of 'modality' and modal logic) sometimes as an ontological concept".[37] We see the ontological tension reflected in a tension between two approaches: either we approach being through metaphysical lenses and we are forced to admit that it comes in many flavors, or we do so through logic and reduce it to a homogenous concept. Scotus's establishment of univocity decided this ambiguity in favor of the second pole, thus absorbing metaphysics into logic.

There is another implication of this: by excluding difference from being, and as a result, the univocity of *ens* was reduced to a superficial unity, to a *quidditative* question concerning sheer essences. In order to establish univocity, *existence was neutralized in favor of essence*. The plane of univocity is a plane of neutral being, indifferent to the distinction between essence and existence, a space of intelligibility free from any ontological commitment. Étienne Gilson famously diagnosed the shift from a Thomist ontology of the primacy of existence to an ontology of the primacy of essence, which would dominate the subsequent development of Western thought: "The identification of existence with essence, in whatever philosophy, is inevitably accompanied by the primacy of essence over existence, since the latter is now no more than an accident".[38] Hence Boulnois's conclusion: "By aiming at *res*, metaphysics achieves the status of science only by abandoning its primary object, being. Metaphysics only becomes ontology by becoming *tinology* – science of *aliquid*, of what is as well as of what is not".[39] While "the idea of mode was invented to make the relationship between essence and existence thinkable",[40] the "essentialization of existence" had as a consequence "the liberation of pure ontology from any commitment to the actually existing being",[41] and therefore it missed the path of reflection on modes of existence.

The *essentialization of existence* and the *logicization of ontology* are one and the

---

[37] Agamben, *L'uso dei corpi*, p. 210.

[38] Étienne Gilson, *L'Être et l'essence*, Vrin, Paris, 1962, p. 165.

[39] Boulnois, *Être et représentation*, p. 513. The concept of "tinology", the science of being as a mere "something", was drawn by Aubenque from his reading of the *Sophist*, and it applies equally well to Meinong and the doctrines that identify objects with their essence independently of existence: Pierre Aubenque, "Une occasion manquée: la genèse avortée de la distinction entre l''étant' et le 'quelque chose'", in Pierre Aubenque (ed.), *Études sur le Sophiste de Platon*, Bibliopolis, Naples 1991, pp. 365-86.

[40] Agamben, *L'uso dei corpi*, p. 203.

[41] Gilson, *L'Être et l'essence*, p. 155.

same process, the canonization of which was Kant's thesis that "existence is not a predicate". Let us read the famous passage from the first *Critique*:

> the actual contains nothing more than the merely possible. A hundred actual dollars do not contain the least bit more than a hundred possible ones. For since the latter signifies the concept and the former its object and its positing in itself, then, in case the former contained more than the latter, my concept would not express the entire object and thus would not be the suitable concept of it. But in my financial condition there is more with a hundred actual dollars than with the mere concept of them (i.e., their possibility). For with actuality the object is not merely included in my concept analytically, but adds synthetically to my concept (which is a determination of my state); yet the hundred dollars themselves that I am thinking of are not in the least increased through this being outside my concept. Thus when I think a thing, through whichever and however many predicates I like (even in its thoroughgoing determination), not the least bit gets added to the thing when I posit in addition that this thing is.[42]

Despite the many different interpretations to which this passage has been subjected, what is certain is that for Kant there is no substantial, intrinsic difference between a concept and the existent corresponding to it. *To claim that existence is not a predicate is to claim that existence and its modes make no relevant difference to entities. This thesis is intelligible only if existence has been reduced to concept beforehand*: "the doctrine of the 'externality' of existence to essence *identifies* objects with essences".[43] As Gilson notes, Kant failed to grasp the authentically "existential" aspect of this problem: "the first thing we would wish to know about any knowable object is whether it exists or not. Nothing is more important if the proposition is true that a living dog is worth more than a dead king".[44] Kant's own example would not have allowed him to forget this, since it does make a difference to me whether the dollars in my pocket are real or not. As Gilson concludes:

---

[42] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of pure reason*, trans. P. Guyer & A. Wood, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1998, p. 567.

[43] Jens Cavallin, *Content and object: Husserl, Twardowski and psychologism*, Springer, Dordrecht, 1997, 105.

[44] Gilson, *L'Être et l'essence*, pp. 10-1.

"Existence is no longer even the modality of a thing, it is now only that of a judgement. Critical idealism is one of the most instructive attempts to circumvent the obstacle that existence poses to the intellect, since it represents the most consistent effort ever made by a philosopher to neutralize it as completely as possible, without, however, denying it".[45]

This led to the reduction of the science of being to a branch of the science of *knowledge* whose object is not what there is but what kinds of idealities thought can grasp. The same process of logicization-essentialization is reproduced by the reduction of existence to quantification from Frege to Quine. But it is also taken up by Meinong and Husserl, two philosophers that are usually regarded as friends of modes of existence: the former's "principle of independence" of *Sosein* from *Sein* means precisely that the properties of objects are independent of their existential status; the latter's idea of a "formal ontology" and the eidetic nature of his phenomenology reproduce this flattening of being onto concept and of existence onto essence. The logicization of being became as much an integral part of ontology as its univocity.

We can say that traditional ontology is in large part the history of the error of flattening metaphysics onto logic in order to obtain a concept of being on which to base a science: essence is not being *qua* being, but being seen through the lens of a particular discipline, that of logic. Souriau was not wrong in describing the opposition between essence and existence as "very poorly done and unworthy of a truly lucid mind", and in proposing to replace essence with the "virtual" mode of existence.[46] We can even go so far as to say that metaphysical essences result from one of those undue "amalgams" between modes denounced by Latour, namely an illegitimate superimposition of logic and metaphysics that has long confused both fields.

"Existence is not analyzable",[47] at least not in the sense that analytic philosophers mean. But this does not imply a general refutation of logic. Existence is not logical, but neither is it aesthetic, nor psychological, nor scientific. Indeed, *some* form of logic is involved in all modes of existence, but logic cannot be transported from its territory to foreign ones without rearrangements,

---

[45] *Ivi*, p. 204.
[46] Étienne Souriau, *L'ombre de Dieu*, PUF, Paris, 1955, p. 297.
[47] Souriau, *The different modes of existence*, p. 125.

limitations, and specifications.[48] To abandon logic as the only framework for ontology is to abandon the presupposition that being must be univocal. The specific object of ontology is less the study of an *ens* than of a *relation*: the relation of difference between modes of being. Philosophy is possible not because of the univocity of being, but because of the intelligibility of the differences between modes of existence.

Before proceeding, we should note that, like any attempt to ground a theoretical proposal in a broad genealogical reconstruction, ours runs the risk of being too general. The equations "being-as-other = existential pluralism" and "being-as-being = univocity" are not fully justified. Deleuze, the thinker of Being as difference, is also the champion of univocity in contemporary continental thought. Unsurprisingly, his genealogy of univocity is quite different from ours: he claims that "from Parmenides to Heidegger it is the same voice which is taken up, in an echo which itself forms the whole deployment of the univocal".[49] Deleuze's favorite intercessors are those philosophers who, like Spinoza and Nietzsche, were able to combine a philosophy of difference with univocity. According to this prestigious line, *it is being itself, and not its concept, that is univocal.* Deleuze will be the most explicit in turning univocity into a mechanism for the proliferation of difference: the *onto-hetero-genesis* he opposes to traditional *onto-tauto-logy*[50] carries out on another level the same opposition we have traced between being-as-being and being-as-other. What is the relationship between this univocal understanding of being-as-other, and the one we have advocated through a proliferation of modes of existence is a question that deserves further attention.

FROM FORMAL ONTOLOGY TO EXISTENTIAL ONTOLOGY

Referring to the contemporary tendency to multiply modes of being, Ludwig

---

[48] Ultimately, it is likely that a philosophy of modes of existence should result in something like Simondon's appeal to "*pluralize logic*": "If it were true that logic bears on statements relative to being only after individuation, a theory of being anterior to all logic would have to be established; this theory could serve as the foundation to logic, for nothing proves in advance that being is individuated in a single possible way; if several types of individuation existed, several logics would also have to exist, each corresponding to a definite type of individuation" (Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in light of notions of form and information*, trans. T. Adkins, Minnesota UP, Minneapolis, 2020, p. 17).

[49] Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*, p. 35.

[50] Miguel De Beistegui, *Truth and genesis: philosophy as differential ontology*, Indiana UP, Indianapolis, 2004.

Landgrebe observed that "Husserl's theory of the regions of Being has a special significance in the development of this problematic, not only because it was the historical starting point for this whole development, but above all because it allowed the methodical presuppositions, in accordance with which one can make distinctions of kinds, regions or strata of what exists, to be seen with exceptional clarity".[51] It is no coincidence that Husserl's framework for regional ontology is still the standard in phenomenological and analytic accounts of modes of existence. This framework is based on the distinction between *material* and *formal* ontologies. Material ontologies explore a particular mode of existence to determine its properties in relation to different modes (the most obvious example being Simondon's *On the mode of existence of technical objects*[52]). Since our aim is to revive first philosophy in a new key, we are not currently concerned with any particular mode of existence. For this reason, our attempt could be equated with Husserl's *formal* ontology, an inquiry into what is common to all modes of existence: formal ontology is neutral about its dominion, whereas a material ontology is valid only for some kinds of entities. Formal ontology corresponds to the traditional understanding of first philosophy. Husserl's idea is to relaunch an investigation of being as being, starting from the awareness that being is multiple. The ontological tension is addressed as such, and Husserl seeks to reconcile the poles of identity and difference by looking for being in what does not change throughout its various modes.

However, we have to follow Husserl's student Roman Ingarden in claiming that Husserl's concept of formal ontology became hegemonic without the concept of "form" underpinning it ever being questioned. Formality for Husserl means generality or universality, which are logical categories: Husserl was biased by the fact that the original reason he developed the notion of regional ontology was his interest in "purifying" logic from psychology. In conceiving of being after identity, Husserl took generality as an index of ontological priority, and for this reason he placed the "formal region" associated with logic above the others: "Husserl does not resolve to endorse a separate 'formal' region that would be of the same order

---

[51] Ludwig Landgrebe, "Regions of being and regional ontologies in Husserl's phenomenology", in W. McKenna (ed.), *Apriori and world: European contributions to Husserlian phenomenology*, The Hague, Nijhoof, 1981, pp.132-51, p. 132.

[52] Gilbert Simondon, *On the mode of existence of technical objects*, trans. C. Malaspina & J. Rogove, Univocal, Minneapolis, 2017.

as 'material' regions, even though he sets formal ontology on a par with material ontologies".[53] In his own words:

> the so-called "formal region" is, after all, not something co-ordinate with the material regions (the regions simpliciter); *properly it is not a region but the empty form of any region whatever*; all the regions, with all their materially filled eidetic particularizations stand, not alongside it, but *under* it – though only formally. This subordination of the material to the formal is shown by the circumstance that *formal ontology contains the forms of all ontologies… and prescribes for material ontologies a formal structure common to them all.*[54]

Because of this, *all* modes must obey *the same* logical laws: "Pure logic aims at this ideal side of science, in respect of its form. It does not aim at the peculiar material of the various special sciences, or the peculiarity of their truths and forms of combination: it aims at what relates to truths and theoretical combinations of truths as such. For this reason *every* science must, on its objective, theoretical side, conform to the laws of logic, which are of an entirely ideal character".[55]

This is why Husserl, despite his project of a regional ontology, is seen by many as supporting a kind of univocity of being with "object" as the highest genus. It is only through the double process of logicization and essentialization that Husserl's formal ontology becomes intelligible: "the basic concept of formal ontology is… the empty 'anything whatever', the object of thought in general, anything that can be conceptually grasped and determined. Formal ontology sets forth the

---

[53] Roman Ingarden, *Controversy over the existence of the world, volume II*, trans. A. Szylewicz, Lang, Frankfurt, 2013, p. 527.

[54] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy. First book: general introduction to a pure phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten, Nijhoff, The Hague, 1973, p. 21.

[55] Edmund Husserl, *Logical investigations, vol. I*, trans. J.N. Findlay, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 105. The fact that both formal and material ontology revolve around *essences* also testifies to Husserl's participation in the logicization and essentialization of being: "Concepts like Something, One, Object, Quality, Relation, Association, Plurality, Number, Order, Ordinal Number, Whole, Part, Magnitude etc., have a basically different character from concepts like House, Tree, Colour, Tone, Space, Sensation, Feeling etc., which for their part express genuine content. Whereas the former group themselves round the empty notion of Something or Object as such, and are associated with this through formal ontological axioms, the latter are disposed about various highest material Genera or Categories, in which *material ontologies* have their root. This cardinal division between the 'formal' and the 'material' spheres of Essence gives us the true distinction between the *analytically a priori* and the *synthetically a priori* disciplines (or laws and necessities)" (Edmund Husserl, *Logical investigations, vol. II*, trans. J.N. Findlay, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 19).

conditions for thinking of objects in general, objects of any sort. Thus it is a part of logic taken as universal analytics"[56]; "only if the notion of object is *not* tied exclusively to that of *reality* is it possible to develop the kind of 'formal ontology' on which Husserl's idea of a 'pure' phenomenology rests"[57]; "one of the reasons – perhaps the most profound – why Husserl did not consider the possibility of an existential ontology as an autonomous discipline must certainly be sought in his *universalist* conception of formal ontology".[58]

Richard's talk of an "existential ontology" refers to the aforementioned Roman Ingarden. It was Ingarden who countered Husserl's bifurcation of formal and material ontology by adding a third discipline, existential ontology, an inquiry centered on *the very concept of modes of existence*: answering ontological questions requires "a strictly ontological analysis of the idea of existence in general and of the ideas of the particular modes of existence".[59] Without pretending to be faithful to Ingarden's original idea,[60] we can say that existential ontology begins when formal ontology loses priority over material ontologies. Formal ontology is simply the material ontology of logic.[61] It is no longer an empty generality that we are aiming at. If we can call Husserl's view a *formal-abstract* method that follows from the logicization of being, what we are trying to achieve is a *formal-concrete* method that starts from the concreteness of the given – from a

---

[56] Landgrebe, *Regions of being*, p. 135.

[57] Cavallin, *Content and object*, p. 42.

[58] Sébastien Richard, "Y a-t-il une ontologie existentielle ? Sur l'architectonique ontologique d'Ingarden", in Olivier Malherbe & Sébastien Richard (eds.), *Forme(s) et modes d'être / Forms and Modes of Being. L'ontologie de Roman Ingarden / The Ontology of Roman Ingarden*, Lang, Bern, 2016, pp. 26-52, p. 52.

[59] Roman Ingarden, *Controversy over the existence of the world, volume I*, trans. A. Szylewicz, Lang, Frankfurt, 2013, p. 88.

[60] While his *Controversy over the existence of the world*, first published in Polish in 1948, remains possibly the greatest contribution to a first philosophy of modes of existence to date, Ingarden still adopts logic as a kind of meta-mode, he reproaches Husserl for not having detached the highest genus *enough*, and overall he seems unwilling to challenge the logicization of being.

[61] For an attack on the notion of existential ontology, see Simons, "Categories and ways of being"; Peter Simons, "Modes and moments in Ingarden's ontology", in Leszek Sosnowski (ed.), *Roman Ingarden's aesthetics and ontology: contemporary readings*, Bloomsbury, New York, 2023, pp. 33-50. For a defense, see Roberto Poli, "Spheres of being and the network of ontological dependences", *Polish Journal of philosophy* 4, 2010, pp. 171-82; Sébastien Richard, "Y a-t-il une ontologie existentielle?"; Giuditta Corbella, *Oggetto e mondo reale nella filosofia di Roman Ingarden (1893-1970)*, PhD thesis, 2022, https://tesionline.unicatt.it/bitstream/10280/147969/1/tesiphd_completa_Corbella.pdf (accessed 11/01/2024).

"radical empiricism" that excludes nothing of what is experienced – and that develops a formal reflection on the variety of modes it witnesses. Existential ontology is the name of the first philosophy of modes of existence we are looking for.

Let us call *modal philosophy*, *modal metaphysics*, *philosophy of modes of existence* or *metaphysics of modes of existence* the kind of philosophy that positively addresses the fact that there is more than one mode of existence. In any philosophy of modes of existence we will be able to distinguish *four* strands. First, what we might call *cosmology*, i.e. the modes that are admitted into existence. The difference between existential monism and existential pluralism is a kind of meta-cosmological difference, but existential pluralisms differ greatly in the modes they admit into existence: the "Moderns" tend to reduce everything to the two modes of Nature and Culture (or Nature and Society, or extension and mind), whereas "nonmodern" collectives usually display a wider range of modes, and cosmological debates may even occur within the same collective, for example when modern philosophers argue about the irreducible existence of values, mathematical entities, or the mind.

Second, there are the *material ontologies* that study particular modes of existence. Simondon's book on technical objects remains the best example, but phenomenology has been a rich source of material investigations, such as Becker's study of mathematical objects, Sartre's material ontology of imagination, Ingarden's and Dufrenne's inquiries into the mode of existence of aesthetic objects, and Scheler's and Hartmann's investigations of the mode of existence of values.[62]

Third, there is the *architectonics* (the term is taken from Souriau) which many draw from their inquiries to form a more or less complete "system" of modes of existence. The architectonic problem is to establish concrete relationships – of dependence, foundation, parallelism, reduction, implication – between the different modes of existence that make up a cosmology. Whereas material

---

[62] Oskar Becker, *Mathematische Existenz: Untersuchungen zur Logik und Ontologie mathematischer Phänomene*, Niemeyer, Tubingen, 1973; Roman Ingarden, *The literary work of art*, trans. G. Grabowicz, Evanston, Northwestern UP, 1979; Mikel Dufrenne, *The phenomenology of aesthetic experience*, trans. E. Casey, Northwestern UP, Evanston 1973; Eugene Kelly, *Material ethics of value: Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2011; Jean-Paul Sartre, *The imaginary: a phenomenological psychology of the imagination*, trans. J. Webber, Routledge, London, 2004.

ontology is an "internalist" study of specific modes, architectonics studies modes in the total system they form. The difference between material inquiry and architectonic concern is best illustrated by the transition from the first and second sections of Simondon's *On the mode of existence of technical objects* to the third: having studied the peculiarities of technicity as a mode of existence, Simondon seeks to incorporate it into an encyclopedic anthropology that classifies the modes that have been correlated with human action and thought since their "magical" beginnings.

Finally there is *existential ontology*, the understanding of what the very idea that being comes in modes means. For most philosophers, this tends to remain in the background, as an implicit framework of the material or architectural side of the inquiry (the main exception are analytical ontologists who, following Quine, equate existence with quantification). The purpose of this paper is to show that it is possible to bring these implicit frameworks to the fore, and to make first philosophy revolve around the possibility of comparing and discussing them before debating cosmological, material and architectural issues.

Existential ontology should replace formal ontology. However, existential ontology remains formal, not in the sense of mere generality, but in the sense of exploring the very meaning of there being different modes of existence in order to establish the tenets of a possible unified philosophy of modes of existence. What follows is a list of questions that existential ontology, meant as a broad research program, might address.

> 1. How do we define distinct modes of existence? Ryle proposed the following test for category differences: "Two proposition-factors are of different categories or types, if there are sentence-frames such that when the expressions for those factors are imported as alternative complements to the same gap-signs, the resultant sentences are significant in the one case and absurd in the other".[63] Latour's appeal to "category mistakes" might suggest that he has a similar test for distinguishing ways of "passing" or "relating" between actors. Another criterion might be James's "radical empiricism", which looks directly at experience in order to deduce from it the heterogeneity of the modal constitution of the world; this idea is also very present in what Latour

---

[63] Ryle, "Categories", p. 181.

calls "second empiricism" which excludes nothing from experience, and in Souriau's method of "existential reduction", which, in contrast to the phenomenological reduction, allows phenomena to emerge in their modal purity.

2. What limits should we impose on the multiplication of modes? Do we not run the risk of unbridled ontological inflationism? The cry of Occam's razor, forbidding the multiplication of entities beyond necessity, is revived by Quine's talk of "Plato's beard" to mock the inflationist tradition culminating in Meinong. For Quine, the "overpopulated universe" of his opponents was "in many ways unlovely. It offends the aesthetic sense of us who have a taste for desert landscapes".[64] This cry did not go unheard; both Souriau and Latour were wary of allowing everything to exist: "On the one hand Souriau makes the modes of existence proliferate, but at the same time he *rarefies* the product in each of the modes".[65] Two principles of parsimony can be applied to the two kinds of pluralism, existential and ontic: a principle of *quantitative* parsimony, which concerns the number of entities, and a principle of *qualitative* parsimony, which concerns the number of *kinds* of entities to which one commits oneself. Many may think that the solution proposed by Souriau-Latour is exactly the opposite of what we need: "the general view that qualitative parsimony is good in a philosophical or empirical hypothesis; but I recognize no presumption whatever in favour of quantitative parsimony".[66] How to deal with modal parsimony is an urgent question for any existential ontology.

3. What is the difference between modes of existence and traditional "modalities"? Philosophers of modalities share the idea that ontology needs to be repopulated with beings excluded by the univocist tradition. A philosophy of modes of existence recognizes that possible beings are not the only kind of non-actual beings to be considered, but the relationship between the two approaches remains problematic. In particular, the idea that being can vary on a scale from potency-possibility to act is related to a form of essentialization of existence, to the extent that it is the *selfsame object* that is actualized, thus making the mode *extrinsic* to the essence. A philosophy of modes of existence should

---

[64] Quine, "On what there is", p. 24.
[65] Latour, "Reflections on Étienne Souriau", p. 337.
[66] David Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 1973, p. 87.

follow Sjoerd van Tuinen's idea that, "in order to approach the operation of individuation, we must… modalize the relation itself between potential and the actual: what passes from potential to actual is not an essence, but the modality or sense in which being alters itself".[67]

4. What is the relation between *existential* pluralism and *ontic* pluralism? In Paul Weiss's Whiteheadian idiom, how should we account for the "togetherness of modes"?[68] If we admit a plurality of modes of existence, must they form a single world? Are they entirely separate worlds? There are indeed cases of extreme adoptions of both forms of monism, such as Eleatic monism, or of both forms of pluralism, such as the "polyrealism" that Souriau exemplifies with Schleiermacher's fideism. However, these two brands of pluralism are not always defended together: "As pantheism shows, ontic monism can accommodate itself to an existential pluralism. And ontic pluralism can endeavor to enhance the value of an existential monism, as in the case of the atomists".[69] Perhaps the best place to explore this is in the debate between James and Francis Herbert Bradley,[70] respectively the advocate of pluralism and the most extreme of absolute idealists, who equally admitted the modal variety of a world they conceived in very different ways.

5. How should modes be conceived intuitively? Should they be thought of as different "sub-world" (James), as "fields" (Bourdieu), "systems" (Luhmann), "realms" (Santayana), "regions" (Husserl), "provinces" (Schütz)? Are these not all instances of the "cartographic metaphors" that Latour saw as typically modern ways of conceptualizing modes as separate "domains"? Should modes rather be conceived as different "levels" or "layers" of being, as in Nicolai Hartmann? Finally, should modes be conceived of as different stages in the instaurative path of an existent, as with Souriau, or as ways of "passing through" and reprising their own existence, as in Latour? More generally, is there a single model for them all, or should the notion of mode itself be different for different existents?

---

[67] Sjoerd van Tuinen, *The philosophy of mannerism. from aesthetics to modal metaphysics*, Bloomsbury, London, 2022, p. 13.

[68] Paul Weiss, *Modes of being*, Southern Illinois UP, Carbondale, 1958.

[69] Souriau, *The different modes of existence*, pp. 99-100.

[70] Francis Herbert Bradley, "On floating ideas and the imaginary", in *Essays on truth and reality*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1914, pp. 28-64.

6. Can *the same* entity exist in more than one mode? What are the criteria for the identity of an entity across modes? Is what Souriau called "multimodality" a common phenomenon, or should we think of things as scattered in heterogeneous aspects across different modes, with no unifying principle? Thinking of modes as different "worlds" seems to suggest that things can only enter one mode at a time. On the contrary, Latour's view preserves the identity of the actors that can "pass" through to different modes. Ultimately, is identity not bound to remain problematic when one commits oneself to the plurality of modes of existence?

7. The most popular question remains: is existence a real predicate? That is, does the mode of existence affect the internal constitution of what exists? Using the terms of the debate between James and Bradley, we can rephrase this question as: are modes and existence internally or externally related? James upholds the standard Kantian view by seeing this relation as external and modes of existence as extrinsically added to a content that retains its identity; Bradley, on the other hand, gives more ground to modes of existence whose internal relation to their content leads to the abolition of the very distinction between modes and existents, thus making modes of existence themselves the quasi-solitary constituents of reality. Does this not end up nullifying the reason why modes of existence were introduced? Is there a way of retaining some difference between modes and entities without subscribing to the essentialist consequences of the Kantian dictum?

The answers to these problems can only be relative to the demands or constraints we place on existential ontology. To give an idea of what reflections following the program of existential ontology might look like, let us take another question that has been popular throughout the history of philosophy and especially in contemporary analytic ontology:

8. What is the relation between being and non-being? Does it even make sense to speak of non-being? And what difference (if any) should we make between being and existence? What is the relationship between these two differences?

This question is so fundamental that we can think of it as a kind of meta-existential question for existential ontology. Using it as an example of how existential ontology works has the further benefit of showing how our point of view, which is inspired by speculative philosophies of modes of existence such as

those of James, Souriau and Latour, can interact with a distant tradition such as analytic ontology when it comes to discussing modes of existence. We will approach this question through a new genealogical sketch starting with Plato's *Sophist*, whose central insight makes it the starting point of the philosophies of modes of existence: that of *making non-being relative to one mode of existence and transforming it into another, equally specific mode of existence*. Negation is turned into difference. This is the key move from being-as-being to being-as-other.

"TO BE OR NOT TO BE IS NO LONGER THE QUESTION": ON EXISTENTIAL DIFFERENCE

If we see Parmenides as the great ancestor of the univocity of being, then it makes sense to locate the deep origins of the philosophies of modes of existence in the *Sophist*, the dialogue in which Plato's *parricide* of Parmenides was enacted. The Oedipal crime was committed by violating the seclusion of being and non-being imposed by the Eleatic master. The murder weapon was *semantics*: if we follow Parmenides and hold that non-being cannot even be thought, then the problem arises that statements denying the existence of something cannot be true or even meaningful, because they lack any object about which to affirm or deny anything. In Quine's words, this is "the old Platonic riddle of nonbeing. Nonbeing must in some sense be, otherwise what is it that there is not?".[71] A quick historical survey would reveal that a kind of "referential constraint", the demand that that *our words and thoughts have an object that somehow exists*, has been one of the driving forces behind the philosophies of modes of existence. Richard Cartwright explains how the question of "negative existentials" has led to the problematization of the univocity of being since the end of the nineteenth century:

> To deny the existence of something – of unicorns, for example – we must indicate what it is the existence of which is being denied; and this requires that unicorns be referred to or mentioned; the negative existential must be about them. But things which do not exist cannot be referred to or mentioned; no statement can be about them. So, given that we have denied their existence, unicorns must after all exist. The apparently true negative existential is thus either false or

---

[71] Quine, "On what there is", p. 21.

not really a statement at all; and, since the argument applies as well in any other case, we seem forced to conclude that there are no true negative existentials.[72]

Every proposition must have a referent. If we are to speak meaningfully of non-being, then there must be a sense in which non-being "is". This is precisely the discovery of the *Sophist*: "A sentence, if it is to be a sentence, must have a subject; without a subject it is impossible" (*Soph.* 262e). If our negative statements are to make sense, then the opposition between being and non-being must be relativized: for Plato, non-being is *being-other*. Although readings of this sentence may differ,[73] one possible interpretation is that *non-being is simply a mode of being DIFFERENT from the one to which we originally ascribed our proposition*. Plato reduces non-being to an internal articulation of the diairetic nature of being. By depotentializing it, non-being can be made inoffensive and integrated into being, thus making *difference* rather than identity an immanent criterion of being. Being-as-other finds its first expression in the *Sophist*, because it "can only be asserted on the condition that being is not the same, nor even in all beings, that there is an infinite number of different beings, and different ways of being: in this lies the parricide".[74]

The reduction of non-being to being-other, the transformation of what is excluded from being into a source of variation in it, is the common background of all philosophies of modes of existence. More generally, they start from the methodological decision to *abandon demarcating concepts*. By "demarcating concepts" we mean concepts that divide everything into two (or more) watertight compartments. To use being as a demarcating concept means to exclude a lot of

---

[72] Richard Cartwright, "Negative existentials", *The Journal of Philosophy* 57, 1960, pp. 629–39, p. 631.

[73] For instance, "there are no flying dinkeys" could be analyzed as "donkeys do not fly": to be a donkey is to be different from any flying being. This reading is compatible with Russell's univocist strategy of using paraphrase to dispose of non-being. Contrary to this *extensional* interpretation, our reading of the *Sophist* will be an *intensional* one, seeing being-as-other in modal terms.

[74] Monique Dixsaut, "La négation, le non-être et l'autre dans le *Sophiste*", in Aubenque, *Études sur le Sophiste*, pp. 165-214, pp. 207-8. This legacy has been recognized: Souriau writes that "Plato renews the problem with this brilliant idea: non-being is not privation of existence; it is, with respect to every determinate mode of existence, being-otherwise" (Souriau, *The different modes of existence*, p. 104); even Latour, who only grudgingly refers to classical authors other than Gorgias or Callicles, recognizes that "philosophy has defined itself ever since [the *Sophist*] with the addition of one form or another of non-being" (Latour, "Reflections on Étienne Souriau", p. 315).

things from it: since "being" only applies to a limited range of things, everything else can be thrown into the basket of non-being. Demarcating concepts lead to what Pavel has called "ontological segregationism", according to which "there is no universe of discourse outside the real world".[75] Demarcation ruptures being but it is actually a strategy of reduction, because things are divided into two groups, but only one of them is given philosophical attention: "the binary categorical modes of Being and Non-Being restrict the construction of a plural ontology and the knowledge of these existences".[76] It is against this view that we must object. It is when the bifurcation between being and non-being disappears that philosophies of modes of existence begin. Instead of a dual opposition between being and non-being, we have modulations of being, a virtually infinite multiplicity of modes of being that pluralize the possible referents of any proposition. As Latour says with his characteristic humor, "we need not limit ourselves to the single alternative that so obsessed the Prince of Denmark. 'To be or not to be' is no longer the question!"[77]

But demarcations tend to reappear. This is what happens when the concept of *existence* enters the scene. According to Dale Jacquette, Plato's conclusions in the *Sophist* stem from a lack of clarity in the use of the verb "to be": this verb can be used in an existential sense, meaning that something simply *is*, and in a predicative sense, meaning that something is *something* determined.[78] As Étienne Gilson recalls, "existence" was born precisely as a substitute for "being", made necessary by the ambiguity of the latter between a predicative and an existential function.[79] Existence replaced being in its existential function. In this way, however, the burden of demarcation was placed on the concept of existence. Existence was taken to mean *actual*, spatiotemporal existence, which cannot be predicated of everything. On the contrary, the domain of "being" was extended to include essences, possibilities and many things that do not actually exist. *Many things are, but do not exist.* Being became the larger domain of which existence was a subclass. With this new alternative, non-being ceased to be a problem.

[75] Thomas Pavel, *Fictional worlds*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, 1986, p. 13.

[76] Renaud-Selim Sanli, "L'abaliété et le problème de la connaissance du singulier : les procédés romanesques", *Nouvelle Revue d'Esthétique* 19(1), 2017, pp. 43-53, p. 44.

[77] Latour, *Inquiry*, p. 178.

[78] Dale Jacquette, *Ontology*, McGill-Queen's UP, Montreal, 2003, p. 15.

[79] Gilson, *L'Être et l'essence*, pp. 14-5.

The being-existence opposition is perhaps less sharp than that between being and non-being; nevertheless, it seems that the problems addressed in the *Sophist* are simply shifted in place when this third term is added. Let us visually represent the three alternatives (the original Parmenidean seclusion of being and non-being, the parricidal relativization of it through being-as-other, and the one resulting from the intrusion of the concept of existence):

| Parmenides | Plato | existential difference |
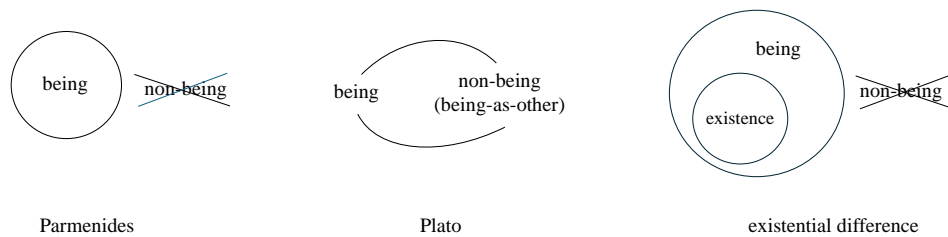
Let us call *existential difference* the difference between being and existence. The dispute over existential difference is one of the major divisions in analytic philosophy: roughly speaking, whereas the Quinean establishment refutes the existential difference by claiming that *everything exists*, i.e. that there is no "being" apart from what *actually* exists, the Meinongians support it by claiming that *there are things that do not exist*. Analytic philosophers tend to agree on what exists, but they disagree on whether being must be restricted to existent things. For Quine, everything exists because to talk about nonexistent things is plain nonsense: "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".[80] Contrary to the face value of the

---

[80] W.V.O. Quine, *Ontological relativity*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, 1969, pp. 99-100. Peter van Inwagen ("Meta-ontology", *Erkenntnis*, 48, pp. 233–50, p. 236) employs a funny narrative to convey the unintuitive nature of the Meinongian existential difference to a Quinean (remember that Wyman is the fictional Meinongian mocked by Quine): "One day my friend Wyman told me that there was a passage on page 253 of volume IV of Meinong's *Collected Works* in which Meinong admitted that his theory of objects was inconsistent. Four hours later, after considerable fruitless searching, I stamped into Wyman's study and informed him with some heat there was no such passage. 'Ah', said Wyman, 'you're wrong. There is such a passage. After all, you were looking for it: there is something you were looking for. I think I can explain your error; although there *is* such a passage, it doesn't *exist*. Your error lay in your failure to appreciate this distinction'. I was

claim that everything exists, Quine does not mean that there are unicorns and round squares. Rather, he means that things that do not exist simply *are not*. The basis of Quine's physicalist reductionism is his reiteration of Parmenides's seclusion of being and non-being and elision of the latter, based on the "deference" to classical logic typical of analytic philosophy, which makes being and non-being tautologically exclusive terms.[81]

The Meinongian option in favor of existential difference, on the other hand, is meant to be more generous about what there is. Possible and impossible objects "are" in their own way; like actual "existence", their "subsistence" is a subclass of "being": "Meinong adopts the moderate realist position that material objects exist and abstract objects subsist, and augments the theory by including incomplete and impossible objects in an extraontology of nonexistent and nonsubsistent objects".[82] Thus, in analytic philosophy, existential difference is read as a way of soliciting existential pluralism. Since both Quineans and Meinongians are surprisingly double-talky in stating their semantic commitments,[83] it is useful to make things clearer through two more schemes:

Quine   Meinong

While appreciating Meinong's ontological generosity, an existential ontology of the kind we have in mind must contend with the basis of his thought. We will argue that the dualism between being and existence paradoxically *limits* in

---

indignant. My refusal to recognize a distinction between existence and being is simply my indignation, recollected in tranquility and generalized".

[81] Berto, *Existence as a real property*, p. xiii.

[82] Dale Jacquette, *Meinongian logic: the semantics of existence and nonexistence*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1996, p. 10.

[83] David Lewis, "Noneism or Allism", *Mind*, 99, 1990, pp. 23-31.

advance the modes of existence that we can take as real. It limits what there is, namely, to the two domains of spatiotemporal existents and to that of "being", the latter conceived in terms of pure essences, according to the logicization of being. Like all categorical demarcations, that between being and existence limits the construction of a plural ontology, because it invites us to group what there is into self-enclosed categories, thus excluding everything that does not fall into one of them, everything that happens "between" the classes we are able to discern: for example, since Meinong conceives of his "objects" in a logical way, they are eternal, and this leaves no room for creation, thus making it impossible to make sense of the aesthetic and fictional beings that so interested Ingarden and Souriau, or of Simondon's technical beings, all of which are related to acts of creation or invention.[84] If we adhere to existential difference, being becomes a differential term that ultimately means non-existence. Meinong's dualism is emancipatory when considered in opposition to the Quinean orthodoxy, *but* it is very limiting when compared to the existential pluralisms of a speculative or phenomenological kind.

Our sketchy reading of the *Sophist* suggests that we should give up, or at least relativize, existential difference, just as Plato relativized the opposition between being and non-being. In short, *for differentiation to begin, demarcations must first be abolished*. The multiplicity of modes of existence only becomes apparent when demarcations are abolished, when everything is admitted on a plane of ontological equality on which interactions and modulations are not forbidden. A philosophy of modes of existence is interested in what happens in the "interstices" between secluded compartments. Instead of demarcating, we should ask with genuine wonder: "*what is reality capable of?*"[85] By simultaneously abandoning reductionism and existential difference, a much richer taxonomy of modes becomes possible.

Existential ontology asks us to apply a "principle of symmetry" to existence, that is, to begin the inquiry with as few presuppositions as possible about the

---

[84] Amie Thomasson, *Fiction and metaphysics*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1999, p. 16: "the only kind of creation permitted in Meinongian accounts is the authors taking an available object and making it fictional (by writing about it in a story). This, it seems to me, is not robust enough to satisfy the ordinary view that authors are genuinely creative in the sense of creating new objects, not merely picking out old objects and thereby making them fictional".

[85] Martin Savransky, *Around the day in eighty worlds: politics of the pluriverse*, Duke UP, Durham, 2021, p. 19.

existence of modes we are going to address. Abolishing the existential difference is the first step in minimizing our conceptual baggage.[86] But once we have done this, how are we to conceive of being/existence in a positive way? How are we to manage the intuitive distinctions between what there is, what there is not, what exists and what does not exist?

If we had to express our position in a slogan, we could try this: *Everything exists, albeit in its own mode.* The abandonment of existential difference means that we can be much more *relaxed* about questions of existence. Any talk of being *qua* being becomes meaningless. Everything that populates this world (values, images, gods, phantoms, delusions) exists, but the infinite modal variation of existence makes this relatively unproblematic. We can, with Routley, "stop playing ball over what does and does not exist. For what we say as to whether something exists will have much less bearing on what we can say about it, upon its features".[87] When talk of being *qua* being loses importance, yes-or-no questions can be transformed into of-what-kind questions; we can finally ask: *in what way does a given thing exist? what is its mode of existence*? Following Plato's move, alterity becomes so tightly enmeshed in being that being/existence acquires a positivity without opposition. Eventually, to deny the existence of something becomes contradictory: non-existence must be thought of as existing otherwise, because everything exists, albeit according to different modes. (The problem of nonexistent objects, which has so preoccupied analytic philosophy, must also be reformulated as the problem of objects existing in modes other than the actual.) Contrary to the Quinean motto, this "everything exists" must be taken *literally*. "Everything" is no longer limited to the physical. In existential ontology, *being and existence are synonyms*, as in Quine, *but nothing is excluded from this being/existence*, as in Meinong. Ontology is not the study of what there is, but of modes of existence.[88]

---

[86] Jacquette, *Ontology*, p. 17: "In equating the use of 'being' and 'existence', we do not imagine that the synonymy contributes in any way to understanding the concept under either name. The point is that entering into open-ended enquiry about the concept of being in pure philosophical ontology makes it important to minimize if we cannot altogether eliminate any conceptual baggage we may have assumed from ontological commitments in applied ontology".

[87] Richard Routley, *Exploring Meinong's jungle and beyond – The Sylvan jungle, Volume 1*, ed. Maureen Eckert, Springer, Dordrecht, 2018, p. 58.

[88] Indeed, "the claim that 'everything is real' is egregiously uninformative" (Ray Brassier, "Concepts and objects", in Bryant et al., *The speculative turn*, pp. 47-65, p. 48), but this does not affect existential ontology, for it opens up a new field of inquiry, that of the meaning of there being multiple modes of existence. This

It may seem paradoxical, but *any philosophy of modes of existence begins with an expression of existential monism*, because only by abrogating essential, external differences between modes can genuine modal differences grow. Existential difference is abolished in order to let modal differences proliferate. *Being-as-other is a way of making being, non-being and existence coincide and differ only modally*, but this "only" makes all the difference; true existential pluralism requires that we *allow modes to communicate and interact on a plane of ontological equality*.[89] If we had to

---

implies that the notoriously problematic distinction between ontology and metaphysics loses some of its relevance. We follow Cicatello in suggesting that "the hypothesis of establishing an epistemic boundary between an investigation that deals solely with what is there and an investigation that deals with what is what is, risks leaving outside the horizon of linguistic practices that physiological transcendence which, on the contrary, innervates every discourse on being and which concerns, precisely, the problematic tension between the linguistic level of preaching and the ontological level of existence" (Angelo Cicatello, "La questione dell'esistenza tra ontologia e metafisica", *Giornale di Metafisica* 39, 2007, pp. 399-420, 418).

[89] A good statement of the minimal monism from which existential pluralism must start can be found in some accounts of "flat ontology". Flat ontology is a codeword used in contemporary continental philosophy to defend a form of univocity, but some formulations of it suggest exactly what we mean. For instance, Graham Harman has described it as "an ontology that *initially* treats all objects in the same way, rather than assuming in advance that different types of objects require completely different ontologies" (Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: a new theory of everything*, Penguin, New York, 2018, 54). But this is not the last word of metaphysics: "we expect a philosophy to tell us about the features that belong to *everything*, but we also want philosophy to tell us about the differences between various *kinds* of things" (*ivi*, p. 55). The problem with most modern philosophy is that it moves too quickly to differentiation without bringing to light the common ground of modes of existence. Existential ontology implies something like the initial flattening promulgated by Harman, except that it focuses less on what all modes have in common than on what it means that there are modes of existence in the first place – that is, on being-as-other. Modal differences are taken directly as the object of ontology because being is difference, and this is precisely the common ground of modes we are looking for. There are many concrete examples of this. Thomas Mercier explains why ontological anthropology can begin by appealing to the univocity of Scotus and Deleuze: "before or after 'composition', the pluriverse… instantiates this commonality, this being-in-common. This signifies that the pluriverse is pluralistic only on the backdrop of a commonality of being, of a 'flat ontology', of an anthropology embracing the principle of "the univocity of Being'… The univocity of being is put forward as the principle of a fundamental symmetry between worlds" (Thomas Clément Mercier, "Uses of 'the pluriverse': cosmos, interrupted – or the others of humanities", *Ostium* 15(2), 2019, pp. 8-9). Patrice Maniglier conveys the same idea by writing that "flat ontology means that the relationships between ontologically heterogeneous terms can be done locally and do not suppose mediation by two general planes… this also means that the real divisions never pass between homogeneous planes, but between the different compositions of heterogeneous entities which stabilize here or there" (Patrice Maniglier, *Le philosophe, la Terre et le virus : Bruno Latour expliqué par l'actualité*, LLL, Paris 2021, pp. 48-9); and Federico Leoni by noting the paradox that "flat ontology is the least flat thing there is. Its flatness simply means that wherever a process is taking place there are effects of being, or if we want effects of nature. More precisely, wherever a process is at work, effects of being are produced whose characteristic is to manifest themselves in a polarised manner, as a tension between two or more ontological planes, as a chaining between two or more

represent the scheme of existential ontology, we would have to draw a chaotic tangle of arrows, a topological magma on a plane of immanence, standing for the many ways in which being/existence differentiates itself.

A final question remains: if being/existence has no opposite, if everything is or exists, how are we to deal with the negative existentials that have underpinned much work on existential pluralism since the *Sophist*? A viable semantic doctrine for this view can be found in Husserl, who elaborated a "sphere-semantics" in his course *Alte und Neue Logik* (1908-9). Central to this is that existential judgements are "cross-sphere judgements", i.e. they must always specify *according to which mode* (to which "sphere of existence") they state the existence of the subject:

> When I say that I believe, perceive, doubt, etc., that such and such is the case, we have a relation between an object associated to the actual sphere – namely myself – and the sphere(s) of my beliefs, perceptions, doubts, etc. Another example is provided by judgments that compare state of affairs at different spheres (for instance, when I say 'Holmes is smarter than I am')… according to Husserl, existential judgments, too, are cross-sphere judgments: they cannot be evaluated while 'looking' at only one sphere at a time. To the contrary, they build bridges between a postulated sphere and the actual sphere. For instance, if we say that the centaur portrayed in the famous painting by Böcklin does not exist, we are referring to an object associated with a postulated sphere and say of this object that it is nothing, more precisely nothing actual.[90]

Negative existentials should be paraphrased as "category mistakes": it is not that something does not exist, but that it exists according to a different mode from the one we had ascribed to it. This does not imply any relativism about existence. Existence is not relative, but it is always modally qualified. Jeanne Hersch

---

heterogeneous kind of being… Of that process or any other process, we should not say, properly, that it "locally establishes relations between heterogeneous terms", but rather that it establishes heterogeneous terms by simultaneously relating them to one another. In this sense, the flat ontology is precisely an ontology of many planes, each one fractured and polarised by the processual line of its genesis, and each fractured and polarised by other planes and other processual lines of genesis" (Federico Leoni, "An ecology without nature? Merleau-Ponty, Simondon, Latour", *Chiasmi International* 24, 2022, 55-69, p. 65).

[90] Giuliano Bacigalupo, "Meinong and Husserl on existence: two solutions of the paradox of non-existence", *Philosophia Scientiae* 18(3), 2014, p. 39-51, p. 47.

conveyed the same idea when she wrote that yes-or-no existential questions are "elliptical", i.e. they forget to specify to which domain of existence they refer[91]; in Souriau's words, if "the idea of non-existence is very difficult to handle" it is because "it is always relative to a given mode of existence, and the number of modes of existence is practically inexhaustible for our thinking".[92] Markus Gabriel puts it perfectly when he writes that "there is no bare existence, but only existence as this or that. Existence is not the description-free pure being-there of individuals or objects below the threshold of further descriptive determinacy… [for instance,] greenness and existence coincide in the green domain, whereas in the hat domain hatness and existence (thatness) equally coincide. For objects to exist is something different in each field".[93] When we ask whether something exists, we have to specify according to which mode – otherwise the straight answer to an unrestricted existential question would be "yes", it exists, in one mode or another.

CONCLUSION

Before discussing what modes of existence there are, what relations there are between them, and how particular modes of existence are to be conceived, philosophers should get clear about what it means that there are different modes of existence – about what they mean by existence and what they mean by saying that it comes in modes. Existential ontology is the formal inquiry into the concept of mode of existence itself. It is a "first philosophy" because it tries to talk about *all* being. But in doing so it does not lose sight of the fact that being comes modally. Its formal approach is applied directly to modal differences. If modal differences have any common formal character, then they can be taken as the

---

[91] Jeanne Hersch, *L'être et la forme*, Baconnière, Neuchâtel, 1946, p. 18.

[92] Souriau, *L'ombre de Dieu*, p. 297.

[93] Gabriel, *Fields of sense*, p. 61. From this point of view, it might be a good idea to speak of 'reality' instead of being or existence, since the word "real" has the peculiarity of always requiring specification. According to John Austin: "whereas we can just say of something 'This is pink', we can't just say of something 'This is real'. And it is not very difficult to see why. We can perfectly well say of something that it is pink without knowing, without any reference to, what it is. But not so with 'real'. For one and the same object may be both a real x and not a real y; an object looking rather like a duck may be a real decoy duck (not just a toy) but not a real duck. When it isn't a real duck but a hallucination, it may still be a real hallucination – as opposed, for instance, to a passing quirk of a vivid imagination… there are no criteria to be laid down *in general* for distinguishing the real from the not real. How this is to be done must depend on *what* it is with respect to which the problem arises in particular cases" (John Austin, *Sense and sensibilia*, Oxford UP, London, 1962, p. 76).

unified object of a philosophy that seeks what is univocal in being precisely in the way it is equivocal. The only univocity is that of modal differences, and this opens up a whole field of research.

This paper was only intended to lay the groundwork of a "research program" to which many can contribute. Our treatment of the "existential difference" and of the problem of non-being is only an example of how existential ontology might work. The existential difference must be given up because it dictates in advance a certain configuration of our cosmologies and architectures of modes of existence, and these are "material" concerns that existential ontology should begin without. Indeed, this is only one option among others, and as such it can be debated and refuted, nor does it dictate what our answers to the other questions we have raised should be.

Nor, finally, does this mean that the literal "everything exists" that we have defended as the basic claim of existential ontology must be the last word in ontology. Existential ontology is both an autonomous field of inquiry and a gateway to cosmological, material and architectural debates. The basic demand of existential ontology could be condensed in the motto: *do not tell in advance*. The assertion that "everything exists" only means that we must not rule out any mode of existence in advance, and that our final conception of what modes of existence and their plurality mean should be quite independent of the system of modes that actually defines our cosmology. It is up to cosmologies and architectonics to decide how to constrain the attribution of being/existence within their collective. What is the precise relationship of existential ontology to cosmology, material ontology and architectonics is another question to be raised.

This minimization of presuppositions is what makes of existential ontology an *inherently diplomatic* ontology: all ontologies can discuss on an equal footing because the boundaries between existence and nonexistence are still to be established. Such diplomacy could also extend beyond the boundaries of Western philosophy. As already mentioned, the question of modes of existence has gained its contemporary visibility thanks to the "ontological turn" in anthropology, the attempt to take seriously the cosmologies of other collectives, abandoning the presupposition of a single objective Nature against which the many "cultures" would proclaim their visions of the world. Now, our attempt to renew first philosophy by centering it on being-as-other and modes of existence could

provide a framework that makes the diversity of cosmologies intelligible. This may be the ultimate ambition of existential ontology. On the other hand, though, this could be taken as a confirmation of the charge that talk of ontology in anthropology is becoming yet another form of colonization: in Martin Savransky's words, "'ontology' is not everybody's problem. Its significance belongs above all to a world which, to varying degrees, still keeps alive the flame of that questionable tradition that so comfortably has split the world into epistemologies and ontologies, appearances and realities, what things are and what they look like".[94] Pretending to define a first philosophy for anthropology would confirm this accusation. This is why it is important to emphasize that existential ontology would be a way of accommodating anthropological diversity *from within* the history of Western philosophy. We do not pretend to speak for everybody. The ambition of existential ontology is more discrete: it can be described as a platform where different cosmologies can interact on a fairly equal footing in order to define what it means that there are different modes of existence, before going on to debate what those modes of existence are. The tools of Western philosophy are used to manage the contribution of something external to it, without swallowing it up. This is after all the fundamental move of all anthropology. Whether this diplomatic aspiration is applied to the divide between analytic and continental philosophy, or to the relationship between different collectives, it makes its definition as a "first philosophy" even more ironic.

frigerio.christian1@gmail.com

---

[94] Savransky, *Around the day in eighty worlds*, p. 6.