

**ENS seminar – « Light Entities and Real Entities »**  
**Handout no. 1 – April 29, 2009**

**« Being » - Some History**

- **The Greeks had no specific word to signify existence:** there is no special verb corresponding to “to exist” in ancient Greek. They only used “ἐστί”, the verb “to be”, to signify existence, and even possibility of various kinds (alethic, deontic, etc.): ἐστί + infinite could mean that it is possible to do something, in the sense that it is allowed, etc.
- One of the central developments in the history of ontology is **the distinction between “being” in its existential meaning, and “being” as used to form predications** (even identity statements), but such a distinction was not that clear for Greek philosophers – whereas, as we shall see, it became quite clear in Medieval philosophy.

**1. Plato vs Aristotle on the meaning(s) of “being”**

**a. Plato’s *Sophist*: *being* as the most general genus, and “*being not*” as “*being different*”.**

- The *Sophist* includes Plato’s mature ontology, where he exposes his ideas on the meaning of “being”. But Plato’s initial problem was not with that which is, but with that which is **not** (as we have seen in the previous course on the ontology of predication).
- The paradox of not-being as considered by Plato is that in trying to speak of it, we speak of *something*—something that *is*. It seems that the expression “not-being” should pick out *nothing*. But if there is nothing to be picked out, any referential expression we use to name it, either a name or a description, fails. We seem unable even to state the puzzle without contradiction!

- People say that Plato in the *Sophist* had the merit of **distinguishing the “is” of predication from the “is” of identity**. He distinguished between absolute non-being (*ἐνολάτιον*, the opposite of being), and non-being in the sense of the *εἰτέρον*, that-which-is-different. The latter just is negative predication: negative propositions to the effect that something is not something mean that something lacks a certain property (“Socrates is not a jelly fish”), or something is not identical with something (“OJ Simpson is not his wife’s murderer”), this does not entail that something *is not simpliciter*, is nothing. Here’s how Plato puts the point:

When we say “not being”, as it seems, we don’t mean something *opposite* to being, but only *different*.—How?—For instance, when we call something “not large,” we don’t indicate by the expression the small any more than the equal.—Of course.—So we won’t agree when someone says a negation signifies an opposite; we will agree only to this much, that the “not” when prefixed to the names following it reveals something *different* [from the names], or rather from the *things* which the names uttered after the negation designate. (*Sophist*, 257b-c)

- As Gill says in the entry on the *Sophist* of the SEP: “Notice that on this view the complete use of ‘is’ in Greek does not correspond to existence in our modern sense: we say that horses exist, whereas imaginary objects, like Pegasus, do not. On the proposed interpretation, anything describable is (exists). So Pegasus is (exists), since we can describe him as a winged horse. On the other hand, what is not is nothing at all—indescribable.” (Gill [2005], § 5.4).
- The *Sophist* proposes a method by means of which we move from the less to the more general notions via serial abstractions. Plato comes to posit five “greatest kinds” (*Sophist*, 254b). He asks two questions about them: (1) what are they like? and (2) what capacity do they have to associate with each other? (254c). The kinds to be discussed are: *motion*, *rest*, *being*, *sameness* and *difference* (and *not-being* is eventually identified with *difference* : 258d-e). *Motion* and *rest* are collectively exhaustive and reciprocally exclusive (anything is either in motion or in rest, nothing is both simultaneously). *Sameness* and *difference* are ascribed to anything (anything is identical with something, namely itself, and different from something else).
- The greatest of the great kinds apply to everything, including *themselves*. Philosophers in the Middle Age would call such kinds *transcendentals*, since they transcend Aristotle's ten categories (to be exposed below). But overall, *being* is the most general of the greatest kinds, that is, **anything is being and being is the most general genus**.

#### b. Aristotle: “Being” is not a genus

- To understand Aristotle's treatment of being, one could begin not with the *Metaphysics* but with his first work in the *organon* (that is, his writings on the subject of logic): the *Categories*. For the “categories” are, from a logical and linguistic viewpoint, the most general “predicables” (*kategoremata*), but also, from an ontological viewpoint, the most general kinds of being.
- Also Plato had his most general kinds, but **none of Aristotle's categories is being**. This because “Being”, as Aristotle says (against Plato) in § 2 of Book Gamma of the *Metaphysics*, is a πολλαχῶς λεγόμενον: it is “said in many ways”. That is, the verb “to be” (*ἐίναι*) has different senses. Consequently, for Aristotle **there is no such genus as the genus of being in general**: one cannot have, as we would say today, a set of everything whatsoever – a universal set, for there is no property of being-in-general from which one could abstract the set of all and only the *x* such that *x* has that property.
- According to the account of the *Categories*, beings can be divided into ten distinct categories (Aristotle never says this explicitly, but it is fair to assume that these are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive of the things there are). The categories include *substance*, *quality*, *quantity*, and *relation*, among others. Of these categories of beings, it is **the first or primary substance** (*οὐσία*), to which Aristotle gives a privileged position, in a sense to be explained. When we claim that a man *is*, or that the white of the man's skin *is*, we are making quite different claims, for the former is *as an individual substance*, whereas the second is *as an accident* (a quality) of the man, and these are quite different kinds of being.

- But then, the universal science of “being qua being”, that is, what we nowadays call metaphysics or ontology, seems to founder on an equivocation: how can there be a *single* science of being when the very term “being” is ambiguous?
- Here comes Aristotle’s doctrine of **the analogy of being**. For Aristotle claims that “being” as different meanings, but not quite like “dog”. “Dog” has different meanings, but it is just an *equivocal* word: it can mean an animal, or a constellation, or a bad actor, or a part of a gun, and these different meanings have nothing in common.
- If the term “being” were ambiguous in the way that “dog” is, Aristotle’s science of being qua being would be as impossible as a science of “dogs qua dogs”. But, Aristotle argues in *Metaphysics* Gamma 2, “being” is not ambiguous in this way. Rather, **the various senses of “being” have what he calls a ‘pros hen’ ambiguity — they are all related to a single central sense.**
- This kind of “analogical meaning” is an analogy of reference of the many senses to a unique, primary one: “Being” has a primary sense as well as related senses in which it applies to other things *because* they are appropriately *related to* things that are called “beings” in the primary sense.
- The beings in the primary sense are (the primary) *substances* – they “subsist in themselves”. The beings in other senses are the qualities, quantities, etc., that *belong to* substances (the other categories). A man is a being, and so is a color, e.g, white, a being. But a man is a being in the primary sense — it is a substance — whereas the color white (a quality) is a being only because it qualifies some substance.
- **An account of the being of anything that is, therefore, will ultimately have to make some reference to substance.** For anything that is either a substance, or a part of a substance, or a quality of a substance, or a relation between substances, or an accident of a substance, etc. Substances are unique in being independent, self-subsistent things; the items in the other categories all depend somehow on substances. Hence, the science of being qua being will involve an account of the central case of beings — substances.
- This is for Aristotle both (a) an ontological and (b) a conceptual dependence: (a) the various beings which are non-substances all owe their being to substances — each of them, as Aristotle puts it, exists only ‘in’ a subject. Each non-substance “is in something, and cannot exist separately from what it is in” (*Cat.* 1a25). So Aristotle claims that if there were no substances, then there would be nothing whatsoever. (b) Consequently, one cannot even understand what an accident or a quality or a relation are as beings, unless one already has the notion of substance.

### c. Aristotelian essentialism on “being”

- I won’t enter into the interpretation of the Aristotelian characterization of the notion of substance as the fundamental kind of being. It is enough to say that **Aristotle’s position on being and existence is normally labeled as a form of “essentialism”**.

- In contemporary terms, one claims that  $E_x$  is an essence of substance  $x$  iff at all possible worlds, some  $y$  has  $E_x$  iff  $y = x$ . In a sense, essences can be seen as packages of specific properties (the essential ones):  $P$  is an essential property of  $x$  iff  $P$  has  $x$  at all worlds at which  $x$  exists, so  $E_x = \{P : P$  is an essential property of  $x\}$ .
- The particular essential properties Aristotle had in mind correspond to what we would call nowadays ***sortal*** (essential) concepts or properties: man, horse, tree, chair, etc. – concepts that “divide reference” (as Quine would say), and separate into kinds things falling under them.
- But the individual essence was considered by Aristotle (and the Aristotelians) also as an element of individuation: the essence  $E_x$  of  $x$  is that which makes of  $x$  the very thing it is. In any case, the essence of an individual substance is for Aristotle the very “core” of the substance, whatever this may mean.
- Now for Aristotle to claim that  $x$  is, or exists (as I said, there is no specific verb for “to exist” in ancient Greek) is to claim that  $x$  has some essence or other, that is, it is an entity of some kind or other, and it instantiates its own essential properties.
- So to say “Plato is” (Plato being a primary, individual substance) is merely elliptical for “Plato is a something or other”, where “something or other” can be substituted by some sortal predicate, or conjunction of predicates, capturing Plato’s essential properties (“is a man”, or anything entailing this, such as “is a philosopher”, etc.). For an entity to be (to exist) is to be what it essentially is; If Plato is essentially a man, then for Plato to be (to exist) is for him to be a man.

## 2. Aquinas: the real distinction between essence and existence

### a. Avicenna on essence, existence, and *possibilia*

- Avicenna is mostly celebrated in ontology for having introduced what is usually called the “real distinction” between ***essence*** and ***existence***.
- Whereas the Greek ontologists had no clear conception of existence as different from essence, the medieval theologians and philosophers, it is usually claimed, were pushed towards stressing the difference because of their religious faith.
- When one believes (as both Christians and Muslims do) in a single God who created anything *else ex nihilo sui et subjecti* (from there being nothing, neither the object itself, nor the matter the object is made of), then one begins to think of existence as an *ek-sistere*: as an emerging of the thing which exists out of nothing (and sometimes also as being *conserved* within existence only insofar as God wants it). If so, **then the essence of a given thing  $x$  should be kept distinct from  $x$ ’s being or existence** – a distinction not to be found, as we claimed, in Aristotle or Plato.
- Avicenna begins by noticing that essences can come forth in two shapes: (a) either *in intellectu*, within intentional phenomena, that is, insofar as one thinks about them (I can think

about *being a Phoenix*); (b) or *in re*, that is, within things themselves (when I meet an object which is a Phoenix).

- If so, then according to Avicenna essences in themselves can be *neither mental representations, nor actually existing objects*, for they could not present themselves in the other fashion. The famous motto is *aequinitas tantum aequinitas* ("horseness is just horseness"). So essences are actually *distinct* from their being instantiated by existing objects (besides being distinct from mental representations: see Miller [2002], § 1).
- If essences are neither existing objects, nor mental items, what is their ontological status? Avicenna claims that essences in themselves are "pure possibilities", that is, they have some kind of being (*esse essentiae*), which is inferior to actual existence (*esse existentiae*). In this sense, Avicenna's essences are close to today's *possibilia*, that is, merely possible things devoid of actual existence – say, inhabitants of possible worlds distinct from @ in (some metaphysical interpretations of) modal logic: for instance, constant domain models with nonactualist quantification.
- So Avicenna appears to think, agreeing on this with Aristotle, that ***being is not univocal***: the being (existence) of essences is distinct from the being (existence) of concrete objects, and the former is kind of an "inferior" mode of being.
- Also, **Avicenna treats existence as a real (accidental) property of essence** (See Miller [2002], *Ibid*). If essences are merely possible, then they enter the actual world only insofar as existence (*esse existentiae*) becomes their *property*; and this can only happen (*accidit*) to them insofar as God wants it; so existence is an accidental property of essences, because their having such a property fully depends on God's free will and decision.
- It is not clear, however, whether Avicenna subscribes to the view that existence is an ordinary, first-level (as we would say today) property of individuals, or not: for an essence to "exist" might mean for a concept, or a property, to have *instances* (the essence *man* exists meaning: there are men, that is, *man* is instantiated). In this case, Avicenna would be closer to the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine line of thought: existence is not a real property of individuals, etc. etc.

### b. Aquinas: existence is no addition to possibility

- Thomas Aquinas' main text on metaphysics is the *De ente et essentia* (1255), a short book with no (direct) theological goal; here Aquinas exposes his general view on ontology in the purest form.
- Aquinas has a linguistic approach: he wrote the book to explain to his students the meaning of two widely used (at the time) philosophical words: "*ens*" (that is, *being*) and "*essentia*" (*essence*). The philosophical usage came mainly from Avicenna.
- Aquinas says that both notions, *ens* and *essentia*, are fundamental concepts because they are implicit in any other ontological notion (*quae primo intellectu concipiuntur*): (a) as for *being*: one cannot conceive of a thing without conceiving it as something that has *being*, that is,

existence. Anything is some being or other, so the concept of being is not a concept that can be *added* to the concept of something (existence is not a real predicate, as Kant would say); on the contrary, any concept whatsoever is an addition and a further specification of the concept *being* (“*unde oportet quod omnes aliae conceptiones intellectus accipientur ex additione ad ens*” – Ch. 1, p. 1). So Aquinas would accept the Quinean motto: everything exists, that is, anything whatsoever has being, is an *existent* thing. (b) as for *essence*: whatever has being has some essence or other, for reasons to be explained below.

- He begins with *ens*, for (a) our experience starts as with *entia*, that is, concrete things, of which (b) we then ask ourselves what makes of them the kind of things they are (one knows several men, then one begins to ask herself what makes of each of them a *man*).
- Now Aquinas makes a first distinction between *real* and *logical* being – following exactly Aristotle: being is “*uno modo quod dividitur per decem genera*”, that is, real being is divided into Aristotle’s 10 categories; “*alio modo quod significant propositionum veritatem*” (Ch. 1, p. 2). The second one doesn’t have to do with metaphysics.
- As for real being, it is divided into Aristotle’s categories because there are several distinct ways of being such-and-so; a man *is* and the color of his skin *is*, but they are different real beings: a man *is* as an individual substance, that which is in and by itself; the color of his skin *is* as an accident (a quality, precisely). Now, as we have seen with Aristotle, the notion of accident can be understood only with reference to an individual substance: an accident is an accident *of* a substance.
- What about *essence*? Aquinas says that:
  - (1) **essence is what is expressed by the definition** of a kind of things – definition being taken in the Aristotelian sense, *per genus et differentiam* (man is rational animal, etc.). So essence is also called *quidditas*, for it is the answer to the question: *what (quid)* is something?
  - (2) **It is also called form**, for in the Aristotelian terminology the form is the determining element of anything – that which makes of it the very kind of thing it is.
  - (3) **It is also called nature**, for it is the inner principle of activity for an entity of a given kind (as when one says that rational activity is the proper nature of mankind).
- Next, Aquinas holds that “*essentia dicitur secundum quod per eam et in ea ens habet esse*”, which entails (against Sartre, *ante litteram*) that **essence precedes existence**: an entity can exist only insofar as it has some essence or other, that is, insofar it is an entity of a precise, determinate kind. If someone only asks “does it exist?”, Aquinas says, one could not answer at all unless it is specified **what is that, of which it is asked whether it exists or not**, and to say what is it that we are talking about (a man, a table, a tree, an angel) is to specify its essence.
- So far Aquinas is mostly repeating Aristotle. But In the fourth chapter of the *De ente et essentia* he talks about incorporeal substances, like the angels. The dominant doctrine at the time was that angels were composed by *form* and *matter* (in the Aristotelian sense), like any created entity, but had some kind of (mysterious) “disembodied matter”. Aquinas rejects the doctrine and claims that they are *pure* form without matter.

- If this is so, what is the difference between any immaterial but created (that is, finite) substance, and God? Here Aquinas makes his move by adapting Avicenna's distinction: **Anything which is not God hosts a real distinction between its essence and its being, that is, its existence.**

- Aquinas' point is worth listening, for it anticipates the Kantian doctrine that existence is not a real predicate. The reason is that *existentia non est de intellectu essentiae*:

Anything which is not included in the concept of a given essence is added to it, and composed with it, for one cannot conceive of an essence without conceiving what constitutes it.

Now any essence can be conceived without knowing anything about its existing or not existing: I can actually understand what a man is, or what a phoenix is, and nevertheless ignore whether there really is any man or any phoenix.

Therefore, it is clear that being is distinct from essence – unless for a thing [res] whose essence *is* its very being. [...]

So if there is something [res], which *is* just being, so that it is being itself as subsistent [*ipsum esse subsistens*], such a thing cannot include any distinction in itself... (Ch. 4, p. 34)

- So Aquinas borrows Avicenna's distinction between essence and existence, but denies that existence is in any sense a property which is added to purely possible, nonactual essences.

#### c. Aquinas: existence as the *actus essendi* of essence

- Aquinas' other original move consists in **applying to the real distinction between essence and existence the Aristotelian distinction between being *in actu* and *in potentia*, that is, actual and potential being.**

• As is well known, Aristotle used the distinction to explain change, becoming, and any process in general (Aristotle's definition of change in the *Metaphysics* is "actualization of what is potential, insofar as it is potential"): so a child is potentially or virtually a man, and to become an adult for a child is to actualize such a potentiality, etc. etc. This was supposed to explain:

(a) why becoming is not a "something-out-of-nothing" process (*ex nihilo nihil fit*), for what is *in actu* as a result of a process of change involving entity x already was in x, albeit only virtually; and  
(b) why it is not the case that everything can become anything whatsoever: thing x can become *in actu* only what it was since the beginning virtually (so a child can become a man because he was virtually a man, but a stone cannot become a man for it wasn't virtually a man).

- Now Aquinas claims: **anything in which beingn that is, existence, and essence are distinct** (that is, anything except possibly God) **has being, but isn't being**. "Now what has some property because of something else virtually depends [*est in potentia*] on that something else; and to instantiate that property is to be actually [*esse in actu*] with respect to it". So **any essence is *in potentia* with respect to existence, or exists only potentially or virtually**. Whereas its existence is the actualization of such a virtuality. Aquinas' most famous motto is: *essentia est id cuius actu est esse*.

### 3. From Hume to Kant: the origins of the standard view

#### a. Hume: existence is no news

- In the *Treatise of Human Nature* Hume supports the view of existence via an argument based upon his empirical theory of knowledge: any knowledge starts from sensory *impressions* impinging upon our sensory apparatus. *Ideas* are just impoverished images variously derived from impressions, etc.
- Now Hume claims that **the very idea of a nonexistent object is absurd**. This comes from a dilemma: either (a) the idea of existence derives from a distinct impression conjoined with any perception of something or other; or (b) it has to be identical with the very idea of the thing. But (a) is inadmissible: one couldn't find *any* impression accompanying *each and every* perception of anything whatsoever (except for trivial properties of anything we can perceive, such as being self-identical).
- Thus we are left with (b): **the idea of existence is but the idea of what we conceive as existent**. ("Existence is not a property", one is tempted to translate.) Those who disagree, challenges Hume, should say exactly *which* distinct idea existence would consist in. This cannot be done, for existence adds nothing to the idea of the thing of which we claim that it exists: **existence is no news**.
- Norman Malcolm's example had to do with a king specifying a list of qualities required from an aspiring chancellor: could *existence* be meaningfully included in the list? ("No nonexistent candidates can apply": see N. Malcolm [1960], "Anselm's Ontological Argument", *Philosophical Review* 69, pp. 41-62)

#### b. Kant: "Existence is not a predicate"

- Kant's claim comes from his famous discussion of the so-called ontological argument for the existence of God in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Actually, Kant doesn't say that existence is not a predicate, but that it is not a *determining* or *real* predicate, which means: a predicate which can be meaningfully included in the definition or the concept of an object:

"By whatever and by however many predicates we may think a thing - even if we completely determine it — we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing is. [...] If we think in a thing every feature of reality except one, the missing reality is not added by my saying that this defective thing exists." (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B628)

- Kant's example is: the concept of 100 real thalers includes nothing more than the concept of 100 merely possible thalers. By claiming that they *exist*, I add nothing to the concept of the 100 thalers.
- What is existential predication, then? What does one claim of *x* when one claims that *x* exists? To claim that God is omnipotent is "to posit [setzen] the subject in connection with the predicate", that is, to perform a mental (judgment) or linguistic (assertion) act to the effect that the object has the relevant property. But to claim that God exists is just to "**posit the object in itself with all its predicates**". Which means that existential predications are claims to the effect that the relevant object is "posited in the global context of experience". Existence is simple, absolute "position", and that's about all one can say on it.