

Ontology and Metaontology. Interview to Francesco Berto.

by Carlo Crosato

Since a couple of weeks Francesco Berto and Matteo Plebani's new book (published by Bloomsbury) about ontology and metaontology is in every bookshop. In this interview, we try to understand the main topics of Berto and Plebani's work and the most interesting news in the world of analytic philosophy.

C.C.: *My first question is about the relation between analytic philosophy and metaphysics. In the earliest pages of your book, you declare that this book is about metaphysics too. Yet, one wanting to approach analytic philosophy may think not to have to do with metaphysics. What does "metaphysics" mean in your semantics?*

F.B.: Crane and Farkas' *Metaphysics* and Garrett's *What Is This Thing Called Metaphysics?* are textbooks of metaphysics. They say that metaphysics is an investigation into the most fundamental and general features of reality. That's what "metaphysics" means in our mouths, too.

Somebody who approaches analytic philosophy and thinks not to have to do with metaphysics probably does not know analytic philosophy, but has been told some things about it. What he's been told is false. Analytic philosophers publish thousands of papers on metaphysics every year.

One may mean by "metaphysics" something else. One may mean something like: «an investigation into non-physical reality». But even when one means that, what the guy has been told is false. A good chunk of those thousands of papers published every year are about non-physical reality.

This is clear. And your reference point is the most original meaning of metaphysics. In your opinion, could the astonishment about the connection between analytics and metaphysics be provoked by the meaning the word "metaphysics" has taken in Middle Ages, and not only by a certain ignorance about analytics?

If you mean that Italian non-analytic philosophers are under the shadow of the Catholic Church – that may well explain their astonishment.

The title of the book says that this is a guide to ontology. The question ontology usually asks is about what there is and what is being. In analytic philosophy, which are the most interesting news

about questions and answers? Are there new questions, or does the Aristotelian question still have the priority?

I take it that the “Aristotelian question” would be “What is being”? If so, then that’s still kind of the main question. The news is, while for some time there’s been nearly only one dominant answer, now there are different answers around.

The dominant answer was due to people like Frege, Quine, or van Inwagen. It said – to use the Quinean motto: «To be is to be the value of a (bound) variable». This meant: the notion of being is given by the quantifier, the variables at issue being for Quine variables of quantification. Quantifiers are expressions like “some” or “there is” (notice: linguists don’t call “there is” a quantifier; logicians and philosophers do). These expressions tell you of how many things one is talking about. For Quine or van Inwagen, that *x is* means that something is *x*, that is, that there is such a thing as *x*. Nothing more, nothing less. In particular, “some” or “there is” can only mean one thing (van Inwagen had a nice argument for this). So “being” must mean one thing too: being is univocal. Additionally, of course everything is, for it does not make sense to claim that there are things such that there are no such things. Kant would have claimed: *being* is not a real property. This means: it does not cut any ice, for it does not split the totality of things into those which have the supposed property, and those which do not. *To be* is not like *to be a table* or *to run*, which do split the world into two: the things that are tables and the things that are not, or the things that run and the things that do not.

Now there are other answers around. Some people, like Jason Turner or Kris McDaniel, agree that the notion of being is captured by the quantifier, but add that “some” can mean different things. In «Some Italians are lovely», «Some numbers are prime», “some” has different meanings. So “being” can have different meanings, too. The being of concrete objects, like Italians, and the being of abstract objects, like numbers, are different and irreducible ways of being. These people are *ontological pluralists*. They agree, in their own way, with the Aristotelian motto that «Being is spoken of in many ways». They may even think that being is spoken of in ways more different than Aristotle might have imagined. As different as Heidegger’s Being is different from the things that are beings, for instance.

Some people, like Eli Hirsch, say that when ontologists disagree on what there is, some ontologist A claiming that there are things of kind *K* while ontologist B claims that there are not, their disagreement is probably shallow. Looks like they disagree on what the world is like, but that’s not what’s actually going on. What is really going on is that they mean different things by “there are”, and both A and B are right given what each of them means. Ontological disagreements are thus, in general, superficial. They boil down to people talking past each other: like when I assert that football is played *II vs. II* and you deny that, but by “football” I mean what you call “soccer”, and by “football” you mean what I call “American football”.

Other people, like Kit Fine and Jonathan Schaffer, claim that what really matters in the question of being is not what there is, but what grounds what – what is more *fundamental*, and whether something is absolutely fundamental. These people are called *grounding theorists*, for they look for the ultimate grounds of reality. Some of them are also called neo-Aristotelians. They are so called for they are close to the Aristotelian view that, while there are different kinds of being, one is more important than the others: *ousia* or (primary) substance. *Ousia* is the ultimate ground of

reality: if there were no substances, say Aristotelians, there would be nothing. What does “ground” mean here? Grounding theorists give sophisticated answers.

Still other people claim that it’s false that to be is to be the value of a (bound) variable. For some things just lack existence: nonexistent objects like my merely possible sister (I actually have no sister, but looks like I could have had one), or Sherlock Holmes, or the unicorn I’ve been dreaming of last night. Some of these things, like a round square, do not exist and could not even exist. The general moral is: some things just lack being, so it is false that “some” captures the notion of being. These people are often called *Meinongians*, from Alexius Meinong, an Austrian philosopher who believed just that. I’m a Meinongian.

Then the title says that this is also a guide to metaontology. What does “metaontology is the new black” mean?

“Metaontology”, in one sense, is used to mean the investigation of the methodology of ontology. How should one *do* ontology? Some say, by armchair a priori speculation and thought experiments. For instance, according to Timothy Williamson’s *The Philosophy of Philosophy* we know about metaphysical necessities via counterfactual reasoning (he would not call the procedure “a priori”, but we can bracket this issue now – it’s certainly armchair philosophy for him anyway). We know that some claim, *P*, is metaphysically necessary by counterfactually supposing that *not-P*, and by developing the supposition. What would happen if *P* failed? If by counterfactually developing the supposition we reach an inconsistency, then we know that *P* is metaphysically necessary.

Someone else says that we do good ontology by looking at our best science, which usually means, natural science, and especially fundamental physics. James Ladyman and Don Ross believe that no ontological question phrased in such a way that science, and ultimately fundamental physics, is in principle prevented from providing a reply, is a question that ought to be asked (e.g., «Supposing the Big Bang is a singularity, what was there before the Big Bang?»). We should rather advocate quietism on questions of this kind.

Some say that doing ontology is about systematizing our intuitions. One simple way to understand what ontologists mean by “intuitions” is to take intuitions as shared beliefs. But someone else says that we should not care about intuitions. For instance, according to ontologists like David Lewis or my friend Achille Varzi mereological composition is unrestricted. This means: whenever you have things *x* and *y*, you automatically have their “mereological sum”, *x + y*. This is the thing whose parts are exactly whatever is part of *x* and whatever is part of *y*. This principle delivers very bizarre scattered objects, for instance, the object whose parts are exactly my left shoe plus the top of the Eiffel Tower. It is certainly counterintuitive to admit in our ontology a thing of this kind, but Lewis and Varzi don’t mind: they believe that unrestricted composition is a principle of true mereology – the true general theory of the notion of *parthood* – and that it can be independently motivated and justified. It may defy shared belief, but then (defied) shared belief has to go.

All of these stances are metaontological: they follow from the fact that ontologists like Varzi, Ladyman, Williamson, etc., have various views on the methodological maxims and principles

ontology ought to adopt. That metaontology is the new black just means: more and more professional philosophers pay attention to these issues, that is, more and more cutting-edge research in ontology in the 21st Century focuses on metaontology. If you want to be up-to-date on ontology, you had better know about metaontology. So read our book (not that I am partial).

Which are the opportunities provided by metaontology to ontology?

Well, it's supposed to help ontologists to get a better understanding of what they are doing, and of how they should be doing it. Just like the methodology of experimental science is supposed to help experimental scientists to get a better understanding of what *they* are doing, and of how they should be doing it.

Quine is the philosopher who suggested to answer the ontological question by writing down a catalogue of all there is. Metaontology, on the other hand, asks about the question itself. In your book, you write about some who propose to introduce a distinction between what there is and being: what does saying that there is something with a lack of being mean?

Let's clarify a bit. Quine marketed the idea that the task of ontology is to write down a catalogue of all there is. That's because for him what there is, is what has being: to be is to be the value of a (bound) variable, so *being* is captured by the quantifier, "there is".

But people like the aforementioned Meinongians deny that the notion of being is captured by the quantifier, for there are things, like Sherlock Holmes, that just do not exist. So they are there: we speak and think of them (I just did), and of course there's something we speak and think about. Only, those things lack being.

Just like us talking about a book, even though this book didn't exist in the bookshops, yet?

"Book" is ambiguous. People apply it to the abstract object («*Jurassic Park* was a hit»), but also to the concrete copies («Can you pick *Jurassic Park* from my bedside table plz?»). The concrete copies of *Ontology and Metaontology* do not exist yet (at the time I'm saying this sentences), but the abstract thing may have been existing for a while. It's another issue what it is for an abstract object to exist, but I guess we don't need to get into this.

We thank you for this preview.

No worries.

