

Introduction

Andrea Bottani
Massimiliano Carrara
Pierdaniele Giaretta

What do we do when we do metaphysics? The aim of this introduction is to give a provisional answer to this question, and then to explain the subtitle of the volume. It is easy to observe that when we do metaphysics we engage in a linguistic activity, mainly consisting of uttering declarative sentences that are not very clear to most people. That is true, but, of course, it is not very informative. What do we speak of when we do metaphysics? A traditional answer could be: we speak of what things *really* are, so suggesting that things can appear in a way that is different from the way they *really* are. So understood, metaphysics is about the sense, or the senses, of “*real* being”. A question that immediately arises is whether the sense of being is unique or is different for different types of things. Another question is whether it is possible that something could appear to be, but *really* not be.

Modern analytic metaphysicians usually answer that the sense of being is unique, while acknowledging that there are different kinds of things, and that to say that something could appear to be but really not be is a plain contradiction, unless what is understood is that it could appear to us that there is something having such and such features, but

really there is no such a thing. Everything exists in a unique general sense of existence.

From this point of view most analytic metaphysicians are committed to theses which are not shared by ancient and other modern metaphysicians. That is true of most, but not of all of them. In fact, for example, Ryle does not agree with the thesis that the sense of being is unique. This suggests that it is possible, and also preferable, to attach a different meaning to the adjective “analytic”. It could be vaguely characterised as alluding to the adoption of a style of doing philosophy mainly based on close conceptual analysis, attention to the ways in which we ordinarily speak or to the ways in which thought may be best expressed, in each case by working out rigorous explicit arguments.

From this different point of view it would be misleading to present analytic metaphysics as the kind of metaphysics that most contemporary analytic philosophers do, first because only a few of them engage in metaphysics at all, and, second, because also some important past metaphysicians adopted an analytic style. Aristotle, St. Thomas and Leibniz are surely among them, even if their work was widely neglected or criticised by the main founders of the analytic tradition, *i.e.* Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein. Why did this happen? More interestingly, could Aristotle, St. Thomas and Leibniz have been more fully taken into account and appreciated by Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein? A negative answer is quite plausible and does not depend only on the possible dispute about the general question of the sense of being.

Even if it cannot be said that Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein shared a common way of approaching the philosophical problems, they converged to create the conditions for what was later called “the linguistic turn”, which was not generally favourable to metaphysics as a discipline. The linguistic turn has been identified with a methodological change of view, based on the idea that what is objective can be expressed through language and the very nature of language is informative about reality: whatever is objective can be shown or is presupposed by language. Typically Wittgenstein grounded the comprehension of reality on the notion of fact (“the world is totality of facts, not of things”), *i.e.* on the very notion that is essential to the understanding of the sense of a proposition and that could be seen as the projection onto reality of the logical-linguistic notion of elementary proposition.

In a relativistic and conventionalist mood, Carnap thought that every relevant and comprehensible question of ontology was reducible to, or identifiable with, a question of choice of a language, or reducible to “internal” questions, where questions are “internal” when they are raised within a linguistic framework, *i.e.* an interpreted formal language. Internal questions are legitimate because they allow true or false answers according to the rules constituting the linguistic framework specified. Such rules specify methods of observation in the case of empirical sciences such as physics and biology, methods of proof in the case of the formal sciences such as logic and mathematics. From a Carnapian point of view, the traditional general ontological or metaphysical question concerning what kinds of things exist reduces to the choice of a vocabulary and both the questions of the nature the kinds of things and of the general principles ruling them are solvable by adopting the appropriate logical constraints, *i.e.* the appropriate definitions or axioms. Even if very differently motivated, Wittgenstein's resort to the notion of linguistic games ended by producing a similar reduction of the traditional metaphysical questions.

It has been observed that Aristotle took the statement of ontological concepts and their careful distinction as a way of clarifying the meaning of words belonging to the natural language. As Chisholm noted “Aristotle says that in discussing the categories, he is concerned in part with our ordinary language. And he says this often enough to provide encouragement to those contemporary philosophers who believe that the statements of metaphysicians, to the extent that they are not completely empty, tells us something about our language”¹ It can even be affirmed that in his ontological research Aristotle was guided by some intuitions concerning the meaning of words in ordinary natural language. Many of his ontological notions are defined or clarified with reference to what can be said or not said in such a language. However Aristotle took language into account only as a starting point and a point of reference. He never presented the metaphysical questions as questions concerning the general form a theory of meaning should take, as for instance Dummett might say. Metaphysics is not taken into account by Aristotle as far as it is required by the understanding of language: it is not admitted only inside and for the needs of an analysis of meaning. *Metaphysics*, book V is a good example of this Aristote-

lian method. In this book there is an analysis of many philosophical terms such as “principle”, “cause”, “nature”, “one”, “being”, “substance”, and so on. For example, the semantic analysis of the term “being” starts from taking into account its use in common natural language, but aims at establishing the base for an independent science of being.

Aristotle’s approach to metaphysics diverges also from some modern views such as, for example, Quine’s naturalised epistemology, where metaphysics is placed in a larger context than a theory of meaning and philosophical accounts are put on a par, and in continuity, with scientific explanations. Such non-Aristotelian views share the idea that ontology should not be pursued independently of the analysis of language or the scientific view of the world or our conceptual framework of thought.

However, more recently, some analytic philosophers such as Strawson, Wiggins, Kripke, Putnam and others acknowledged, in very different ways and degrees, that there are intuitions about what things are that ground both our comprehension of words and our identification of things. Most of them do not go beyond an appeal to ontological intuitions. Only some of them engage in autonomously developing or theorising more or less intuitive ontological concepts. They argue for full-blown ontological theses, sometimes resorting to logical and formal tools. Of course such philosophers cannot be said to belong to the linguistic turn. Indeed the influence of their work has made some people speak of “ontological turn” and it is also interesting to notice that their work was not considered outside the field of analytic philosophy. They can still be taken as analytic philosophers because of the attention to the language, and the application of rigorous, sometimes formal, methodology. We are thinking of, for example, A. Prior, P.T. Geach, or D.K. Lewis.

Modern analytic metaphysics is different from the traditional approach as concerns the general view of being or existence and the more accurate styles and methods of arguing. Moreover, some absolutely original methodological questions and ontological theses have been put forward. One is the analysis of what part of a language has ontological import. This problem was raised by Quine and answered in a famous way: to find out what kinds of entities a given theory takes as existing

one has to look at what kinds of entities are quantified over through expressions like “there is” and “everything”. It is the criterion of ontological commitment, also expressed as “to be is to be a value of a bound variable” (Quine [1953], pp.14-5) The criterion is only a test for detecting what entities one is committed to. Quine’s criterion has been widely accepted, but has generated also discussion concerning the relation between existence as expressed by “there is” and other possible senses of existence. As we have already said, not everyone has accepted that the sense of existence is unique and is expressed by the existential quantifier.

The other principal innovations brought to the fore by modern analytic research in ontology concern identity. In analytic metaphysics it is taken into account from three new points of view. First, identity is seen as an ontological relation presupposed by our basic practice of identifying entities. This kind of topic was initiated by Strawson and its ontological implications more fully pursued by Wiggins. The most original aspect of this topic is given by the connection of identity with our way of conceptualising entities. Second, in this context, Wiggins took identity as a relation that primitively applies also to entities picked out at different times. So identity, sortally qualified, grounds both identifying and reidentifying practices. Third, a methodological question concerning identity was raised by Quine: the clarity with which identity can be explicated, in short the definiteness of identity criteria, confers ontological legitimacy on the entities for which the identity criteria are stated. As we have already said, not all these theses have been fully accepted, but each has constituted a new and original topic for metaphysics.

These are some themes of “analytic metaphysics”. But they are not the only ones. Other themes can be mentioned which are as fully debated even if not completely new. One of these is, for example, the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties.

However, rather than mention the specific topics dealt with by analytic philosophers, it could be useful to give a glimpse of the way in which metaphysics is taken and pursued by them. Let us try to formulate some ingredients of a provisional picture.

Individuals, Essence and Identity

Themes of Analytic Metaphysics

Bottani, A.C.; Carrara, M.; Giaretta, P. (Eds.)

2002, XV, 501 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0548-0