Individual things, qualities, facts and classes are for many philosophers the basic entities that make up reality. Answering the ontological question on what there really is, means saying precisely what those entities actually are.

Thomas Gil

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Preface

The question about what reality is made of has been answered differently in the history of Western philosophy. It is the question about fundamental beings, existing things, or existing entities: the so-called ontological question. In what follows I intend to reconstruct some of the more influential answers to it. The authors analysed are representative of specific ways of thinking that make up the philosophical heritage we should cultivate if we want to go on thinking properly, that is, making subtle distinctions and differentiations, using adequately concepts and arguments, and contributing efficiently to the development of our rational powers.
1.

Substantial Being and Accidental Being

For Plato, the real thing is not material, not what we perceive with our senses. In a strict sense, reality is for him ideal: a matter of forms that explain how the things we see and hear are possible. Studying mathematics holds, for Plato, the key to all understanding. And only objects as stable, constant and universal as the objects of mathematics can be the real objects of knowledge. Knowledge comes therefore from thinking, not looking. To escape from the naive view that concentrates on material things and takes them for the real things, the knowledge of pure mathematics and geometry is consequently for Plato the only way to go.

Knowing was for Plato like meeting something, like having a relationship to something, that is, having a relationship to something ideal, not material. Greek words were then frequently understood as names for objects. And abstract nouns like “Beauty” pushed the Greek mind into
thinking that “the Beautiful” (‟tò kalón”) actually exists in some ideal way.

Mathematics and the reifying Greek natural language contributed substantially to the coming about of Plato’s theory of real being, to the coming about of his theory of Forms. Observable things, according to such a theory, exist because they participate in the reality of Forms. And Forms constitute the reality of what we see, hear and experience.

In Plato’s philosophical school, in his Academy, many problems concerning the reality of Forms were however controversially discussed. How many Forms are there? Are there Forms for man-made objects? Are there Forms for nasty and unpleasant particulars? How is the relation between Particulars and Forms as Universals to be precisely conceived of? These and similar questions lead to several perplexities and difficulties Platonists could not easily get rid of.

Ultimate reality was for Plato and all those who accepted the theory of Forms a matter of abstract Universals on which the reality of everything else is somehow dependent.
Not individual entities but abstract Forms constitute then the basic furniture of the real world. Such a theory was not easy to understand, let alone to accept. Aristotle did not accept it. He directed numerous efforts to develop an alternative theory of being, an alternative ontology. What are the real things science has to deal with? What are the fundamental items with which an explanatory science must concern itself? That is the question of ontology, the science of being, the question to which Aristotle devotes his early writing the “Categories” and the somehow obscure work the “Metaphysics”.

Aristotle’s first insight is that “being” is said or predicated in many and different ways. “Being” can be said or predicated of certain things or entities which do not depend on others in order to exist. Aristotle calls such things “substances”. Substances are “individuals” to which we refer with expressions like “this so-and-so”. Substances are capable of being designated by a demonstrative phrase. They are separable items, things whose existence is not a matter of some other thing being modified in some way or other. But “being” can also be predicated in sentences that give an answer to questions like “What are its
qualities?”, “How large is it?”,”How is it related to other things?”, “Where is it?”, and other similar questions. The “being” appearing in such sentences is according to Aristotle an accidental “being”, an accidental way of being that presupposes the existence of a substantial “what” that it qualifies. Substantial beings are ultimate subjects. They are separable. They are not parasitic. Accidental ways of beings are parasitic. They are dependent on other beings, and they are not separable from them, that is, they are not separable from the substantial beings they are said of.

Aristotle’s primary concern in the “Categories” is not a concern about language. His main concern is about the things there are (“ta onta”). He is not concerned with words, but rather with the things words describe. Aristotle wants to get, through the operation of analysing language, a rational taxonomy of the kinds of being there are. His project is mainly an ontological, not a project of linguistics.

For Aristotle there are irreducibly different kinds of things. There are things that are “said-of” or that are said to be “in” something else. And
there are things that are neither “said-of” nor “in”: the category of primary substance. Aristotle’s ontology has a profoundly anti-Platonic orientation. Where Plato sees univocity, synonymy, and similarity, Aristotle sees multiplicity, homonymy (same word, different meaning), and variation.

A substance (the first and most important Aristotelian category) is what exists in a basic, non-derived, and independent way. It is something that exists in its own right. All other categories are nominalized versions of questions one might ask about any substantial entity. Hence, if there were no substances, it would be impossible for anything else to exist. Substantial beings are “primary” because other things depend upon them, whereas they do not depend upon other things. Where there are qualities and categorical qualifications, there are things qualified. And those things qualified are primary substances.

Critically examined, the Aristotelian categories are codified common sense: the way we speak about what there is, and the way we conceive of the things that exist.
2. Things and Qualities

The statement “Beings are not to be multiplied beyond necessity” is frequently associated with William of Ockham. Ockham himself never used it that way, although he often says equivalent things when recommending ways of proceeding in science and ontology. The idea behind the statement is that confining our ontology (our philosophy of existing things) to what is really needed, guarantees that it will be populated only by genuine entities. Ockham tries to demonstrate, when confronted with complex ontologies, that what is to be accomplished with certain entities can easily be done without them.

Concerning Aristotle’s categories Ockham cuts Aristotle’s list from ten to two, admitting only substance and quality. Ockham’s rejection of superfluous kinds of entities is known as “the principle of parsimony” or “Ockham’s razor”. Concerning the categories, the principle of parsimony helps us to find out whether we have
to admit distinct particulars falling under our universal terms in each of the ten categories.

What Ockham wants to determine, in other words, is how our words and the concepts that render them meaningful are related to the things they represent. And he does it avoiding multiplying beings according to the multiplicity of terms which would be erroneous and would lead far away from the truth. In order to avoid unnecessary multiplication of beings according to the multiplicity of terms it is necessary to show that many of the terms we use are “connotative” rather than “absolute”. An “absolute” term is one that signifies things absolutely, whereas a “connotative” term is one that signifies things in relation to something or some things.

Ockham’s eliminative strategy removes the assumption of essentiality of abstract terms in the accidental categories, showing that the Aristotelian doctrine of the categories does not entail an ontological commitment to ten mutually exclusive classes of entities. In Ockham’s view, only substance and quality require such a commitment.
Ockham’s eliminative strategy is an ambitious project. Ockham sets out to simplify the conceptual structure of all theoretical sciences by ridding them of what he perceived as unnecessary accretions that were theoretically unjustifiable. It is a project of ontological and scientific reduction. He accepts traditional ways of speaking about things. It is, without any doubt, functional to say that some things are large and small, heavy or light, round or square, long and short, hot or cold, that some things are related to others, that some act or are acted upon, that some are here or there, now or then, that some are in motion or not moving, and so on. What Ockham rejects is the practice of certain philosophers who freely form abstract nominalizations out of these and other ways of speaking, and then assume that such nominalizations refer to new kinds of real entities, so that their ontologies end up being populated not only by substances and qualities, but also by quantities, relations, actions, passions (being acted upon), places, times, motions, and so on. Saying things, in other words, does not presuppose the separate existence of certain entities.
Ockham’s ontology, therefore, consists of things or entities that can be nominally expressed, that can be signified, and of which terms can be predicated, that is, it consists of individual substances, and individual qualities. But Ockham accepts other factors too that cannot be nominally expressed and cannot be signified, of which terms can’t be predicated, and which are relevant and functional ways of saying things concerning what there really is. Concerning Universals Ockham is a “nominalist” because he consequently denies their existence as separately existing things. There is nothing outside the soul for Ockham which is universal. Only singular entities exist, but there are various and diverse possibilities for the soul (the soul’s “intentions”) to refer to them. In Ockham’s own words: “... every universal is an intention of the mind which, on the most probable account, is identical with the act of understanding ... the universal is an intention of the soul capable of being predicated of many. The claim can be corroborated by argument. For everyone agrees that a universal is something predicable of many, but only an intention of the soul or a conventional sign is predicated ... Therefore, only an intention of the soul or a conventional sign is a universal ...” (Ockham’s Theory of Terms, 1998, 81f.).
For Ludwig Wittgenstein, the author of the “Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus”, the world consists of “facts”. “Facts” are what makes propositions, that is, what we say or state about the world, true or false. Facts are not objects or things. Objects or things constitute the facts by being related to other objects or things in specific ways. These are some of the main theses Wittgenstein presents in his “Tractatus”, being convinced of the fact that what can be said at all can be said clearly.

In statements that cannot lead to contradiction or confusion, Wittgenstein presents and elaborates his answer to the question concerning what there is. “The world is everything that is the case”. This is Wittgenstein’s first thesis. How that statement is to be understood is said in I.I: “The world is the totality of facts, not of things”. In other words: what is the case is the totality of facts, all the facts: facts and not things: “... the totality of facts
determines both what is the case, and also all that is not the case ... The world divides into facts.”

Not allowing the possibility of any wrong idea or inference, Wittgenstein goes on determining: “What is the case, the fact, is the existence of atomic facts ... An atomic fact is a combination of objects (entities, things)”. Things are therefore constituent parts of facts. And facts are what the world is made of.

The nature of things consists in their possibility of occurring in facts. So when we think of things or objects, we think of the possibility of their connection with other things and objects. This means that knowing a thing or an object is to know the possibilities of its occurrence in facts when combined with or related to other things and objects. “2.013 Every thing is, as it were, in a space of possible atomic facts. I can think of this space as empty, but not of the thing without the space”.

It is a logical consequence of all this that “2.0272 The configuration of the objects forms the atomic fact”. That means that “2.03 In the atomic fact objects hang one in another, like the
links of a chain”. The structure of a fact can only therefore be the way in which objects hang together in a specific existing constellation:

“2.032 The way in which objects hang together in the atomic fact is the structure of the atomic fact.”

Wittgenstein’s mathematically deduced argument leads to his main ontological thesis: “2.04 The totality of existent atomic facts is the world”.

The facts of the world can be mentally and linguistically represented in what Wittgenstein calls “pictures” or “thoughts” (“logical pictures”). Wittgenstein conceives of a “picture” as a “model of reality”. In such a conception, the elements of the picture correspond to the objects or things in the world. They stand for them. And they are combined in the picture as the objects or things are combined with one another in reality.

“2.141 The picture is a fact ... That the elements of the picture are combined with one another in a definite way, represents that the things are so combined with one another. This connexion of the elements of the picture is called its structure, and the possibility of this structure is called the form of representation of the picture”.

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Representation through a picture presupposes according to Wittgenstein that there must be “something identical” in the picture and the pictured. “2.17 What the picture must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it after its manner ... is its form of representation”.

Because there is such a common form to the picture and the pictured, pictures can represent facts of the world. “Thoughts”, in Wittgenstein’s conception, are logical pictures of (possible or real) facts, so that the totality of true thoughts is a picture of the world.

Wittgenstein’s ontological commitments are therefore the following ones: the basic units of the world are facts; facts are not objects; facts are combinations of objects. Facts can be represented in thought and language. In language, words combine to form sentences. But sentences are lists of words. Sentences, like facts, have a form, a structure. They have a kind of completeness or unity which lists do not have. Sentences may be true or false depending on the form of the facts they linguistically represent.
Willard Van Orman Quine wants to know how our referential apparatus works. He is not only interested in ontological matters, in knowing what there is, but also in finding out how we refer to what there is, using different languages, and reacting properly to the information we get through our senses. How do we come to have knowledge at all? How can our thoughts be about the world? How does the mind come to be in contact with things other than the mental? These and other similar questions are the questions that interest Quine.

It is a long way from forms of energy impinging on the sensory surfaces of our bodies to our thought about the world and to the empirical content of our most sophisticated theories. And it is this long way that Quine tries to elucidate: from sensory stimulus to observational sentences, and from observational sentences to theoretical and scientific discourse. As everything we know
about the world is due to the impingement of energy on our senses, and as our observational sentences (or linguistic reactions) encapsulate that impingement, observational sentences are for Quine at the foundation of all knowledge.

Observational sentences, our most primitive linguistic reactions, are brought about by the occurrence of relevant stimulation of our sensory surfaces. And then a complex process of substantial reification takes place guided in the end by quite sophisticated theories. But the first steps of reification take place early at the observational level.

Reification requires the ability to use words and sentences. That ability is acquired little by little in different learning contexts. The end result of the social learning process the acquisition of a language is will be a referential apparatus that allows us to have knowledge of reality.

Our uttering and understanding of uttered sentences is the activity of language use: the so-called “referential function” as a socially acquired ability to speak about the world. All things we say have an “ontological commitment”. There must
be objects of which the corresponding sentences are true. Such objects must exist if our sentences are to be true. In such a way, when we speak and say things, we are committed to there being objects that validate what we say. Therefore, Quine can assert: “To be is to be the value of a variable”. A variable is a letter from near the end of the alphabet (x, y, z) that can replace possible names for concrete objects. Thus we may obtain “x is human” from “Socrates is human”. “x” would be the variable that replaces “Socrates” as a concrete individual we actually name. To be a value for a variable is to be an object that can occupy the position of a variable. And variables are positions to be occupied by objects and functions our sentences and theories provide. Quine will insist on the importance of eliminating names along the lines suggested by Russell’s application of a theory of descriptions.

To accomplish the task of finding out the ontological commitments of our sentences and theories, Quine uses first-order logic. Its clarity and its simplicity are a warrant in Quine’s eyes for adequately regimenting our ways of speaking about the world, and thus for arriving at a justifiable ontology.
Ontology is on Quine’s account language-relative and theory-relative, because there is no language-independent sense in which we can say what there is or isn’t. But Quine is not a relativist. He is a realist. For him all of our knowledge has the same aim: obtaining the best theory for predicting and understanding the course of events in the world. The idea of the “best theory” has for Quine to do with simplicity as well as with conformity with observation. Therefore, if it is part of our theory of the world that there are mountains, stars, atoms, electrons, and sets or classes, then we are committed to the idea that these things really exist. Quine as a realist takes the objects presupposed by our best ways of speaking and our best theories to be real.

The relation we get in such a philosophy between language and the world is not a relation between names and objects but rather a relation between sentences (which will always be linked to other sentences) and sensory stimulations or inputs. Objects (whether individual things or classes) are strictly speaking “roles” or “nodes” in languages and theories. And languages and theories will always be wholes of sentences, that is, sentences always linked to other sentences.
In Quine’s ontology there is a primacy of sentences. In Quine’s ontology, more important than what there is, is what there is not, that is, what is resolutely denied the status of being an existent entity (properties, facts, meanings, ideas, sense-data, and many other so-called intensional entities). And in Quine’s ontology the absolutely most important thing is the apt reconstruction of how we get to know what there really is.

5.

Truth-Functional Sentences

Expressions like “Corresponding to the facts” or “Being true to the facts” may be difficult to understand if, as Donald Davidson explains, the facts that supposedly verify sentences and theories can only be individuated or described by those same sentences and theories. Indeed as Davidson writes himself: “... it becomes difficult to describe the fact that verifies a sentence except by using that sentence itself” (Davidson, 1991, 49).
Correspondence theories of truth and meaning presuppose the existence of two different things to be compared: on the one hand, the facts or reality, on the other, the sentences or theories that are to be verified. Therefore, their defence is not an easy task. Then only speaking about reality, using sentences to refer to it, we can say what there is, and we particularize the single facts that make our sentences true, if there is anything that can make them true at all. “Correspondence” being weird, we need a better expression or a better picture to understand how our sentences refer to real things and happenings.

Persons as rational animals have propositional attitudes concerning the world that surrounds them and the other living beings existing in it. They believe, desire, intend things, and they have certain feelings. For Davidson, such propositional attitudes provide the right criterion of their rationality, and they come as a matched set. One belief requires many beliefs, and beliefs demand other attitudes such as intentions and desires. If they are able to understand what other persons utter, this has something to do with the fact that they share beliefs, desires and intentions with these others. The complex patterns of behaviour they
manifest are based on those common beliefs, desires and intentions. Without language, neither the patterns of behaviour themselves nor the beliefs, desires and intentions would be possible. Rational creatures like human beings cannot have thoughts unless they have language. And in order to be a thinking, rational person, the living being must be able to express many thoughts, and be able to interpret the speech and thoughts of others.

So when it comes to the main question of ontology, the question about what there really is, a possible way of trying to find the right answer would be to start with the simple and undeniable experience that there are people and their various written and acoustical products, interacting with other people, and understanding what they say and utter. The second step would be to ask how that may be possible. And the only possible answer to such a question would be to understand how the sentences or thoughts uttered by people imply one another, and how they contain shared information or knowledge about the external world.
Speakers, interpreters, and world come together in communication processes that are only possible because speaking individuals, interpreting individuals, and world do really come together. The beliefs, intentions, and other propositional attitudes individuals have, are only possible because those individuals share something with others. What they actually share with other people, knowing that they share it, is a world of objects and events, and a way of thinking about that world of objects and events. Davidson calls such communication “triangulation”, and describes it in the following passage I would like to quote: “The basic situation is one that involves two or more creatures simultaneously in interaction with each other and with the world they share; it is what I call triangulation. It is the result of a threefold interaction, an interaction which is twofold from the point of view of each of the two agents: each is interacting simultaneously with the world and with the other agent. To put things in a strictly different way, each creature learns to correlate the reactions of other creatures with changes or objects in the world to which it also reacts” (Davidson, 2001, 128).
The conclusion of these considerations is that there are truth-functional sentences people utter and understand. And such sentences are truth-functional because they can convey information about reality. They are uttered and understood by people who share, and know that share, a world of objects and events. People understand other speaking minds because they share knowledge of the world with them. Knowledge of other minds and knowledge of the world are mutually dependent. Neither is possible without the other.
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