

Metaphysics Today and Tomorrow*

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École normale supérieure, Paris – October 2011

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“By metaphysics, I do not mean those abstract considerations of certain imaginary properties, the principal use of which is to furnish the wherewithal for endless dispute to those who want to dispute. By this science I mean the general truths which can serve as principles for the particular sciences.”

Malebranche

Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion

1. The interminable agony of metaphysics

Throughout the twentieth century, numerous philosophers sounded the death knell of metaphysics. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rudolf Carnap, Martin Heidegger, Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, and, henceforth, Hilary Putnam: a great many tutelary figures have extolled the rejection, the exceeding, the elimination, or the deconstruction of first philosophy. All these necrological chronicles do not have the same radiance, the same seriousness, nor the same motivations, but they all agree to dismiss the discipline, which in the past was considered “the queen of the sciences”, with a violence at times comparable to the prestige it commanded at the time of its impunity. Even today, certain philosophers hastily spread the tragic news with contempt for philosophical inquiry, as if its grave solemnity bestowed upon it some obviousness. Thus, Franco Volpi writes:

‘Grand metaphysics is dead!’ is the slogan which applies to *the majority of contemporary philosophers, whether continentals or of analytic profession*. They all treat metaphysics as a dead dog.¹

In this way, the “path of modern thought” would declare itself vociferously “anti-metaphysical and finally post-metaphysical”. Is this to say that, on the brink of the twenty-first century, metaphysics is henceforth reducible to the historical study of a corpus forever closed and irrelevant to the present day? Must everyone stifle in the prison of their sheepish minds this “metaphysical need” which Arthur Schopenhauer praised for its universality? To respond to these falsely ingenuous questions, it is advisable to reopen the dossier of the death certificate for the nth time.

* This text was conceived as a synthetic introduction to the present-day situation of metaphysics and of ontology, to their stakes and their practices in the world and in France, by way of a preamble to the activities of the *Atelier de métaphysique et d’ontologie contemporaines* [Workshop on Contemporary Metaphysics and Ontology] at the École normale supérieure. It certainly does not claim to replace the more informed and complete works on which it rests, and which are indicated in the bibliography. Nor was it written with the intention of being polemical against whatever conception of metaphysics, even if it goes without saying that the question is approached in a necessarily partisan, though resolutely conciliatory, manner.

It is not possible – nor desirable – to recall all of the critiques that “metaphysics” has given rise to since Immanuel Kant, without taking the pains of defining what one means by this term. Here it will suffice to review the most important metaphysics of the last century, by partly synthesizing the patient analysis of the question that Frédéric Nef carried out in *Qu’est-ce que la métaphysique ?*²; an “unrewarding task”, in his own words, but necessary for attempting to justify the role of metaphysics and disentangle its contemporary stakes. Particular attention will be paid to the Heideggerian critique, given its considerable influence on German and French philosophy up to the present. Moreover, it would not be incorrect to claim that the majority of subsequent attacks against metaphysics are inherited from the criticisms made by the author of *Being and Time*, in one way or another. However, in another tradition the anti-metaphysical accusations were no less violent nor less resounding: the famous current initiated at the beginning of the twentieth century that, despite the ambiguity of the expression,³ we customarily call “analytic philosophy”,⁴ and which corresponds to the majority of international philosophical publications today. Paradoxically, and in contrast to the majority of other philosophical traditions, metaphysics flourishes among the “analytics” today, even though they sometimes continue to be associated with a hostility towards first philosophy, despite the fact that this only applies to a relatively brief period of their history.⁵ In this first retrospective moment, we will nevertheless examine with the same care the “analytic” attempts to devalue metaphysics, which can be subsumed schematically under four rubrics: therapeutic quietism, logical positivism, ordinary language philosophy, and contemporary anti-realism.

If we exclude the already outmoded Comtian, neo-Kantian, and Nietzschean critiques, we may think that the kick-off to the anti-metaphysical offensive in the twentieth century began with Wittgenstein. Let us examine the ante-penultimate proposition (6.53) from the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*:

The right method of philosophy would be this: To say nothing that except what can be said, *i.e.* the propositions of natural science, *i.e.* something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other – he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy – but it would be the only strictly correct method.⁶

The critique is radical: metaphysics is a vain and illusory discourse; it cannot say anything legitimately about what it claims to speak of, and as a result can only lead to nonsense. In the preamble to his French translation, Gilles Gaston Granger classically defines the Tractarian project as one of a “negative philosophy”, by comparing it to the negative theology of the Neo-Platonic tradition, which for Plotinus culminated in an apophatic silence. Granger summarizes the stakes of the work:

The *Tractatus* aims not to say what the reality of the world is, but rather to delimit what is thinkable about it, that is to say, expressible in a language. And only the true or false propositions of science would satisfy this demand. The discourse of the philosopher can only make the correct functioning of language manifest, and show the illusory character of its use while claiming to go beyond a [properly scientific] description of the facts.⁷

Thus, the great questions of metaphysics cannot receive a response, but only “an answer which cannot be expressed[;] the question too cannot be expressed” (6.5) It follows that the metaphysician must purely and simply cease talking, as in the famous conclusion of the *Tractatus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” (7) Such is the halting point of Wittgenstein’s

“therapeutic” perspective: once the nonsense of metaphysical statements is diagnosed, only quietism can be prescribed as the ultimate remedy. Nevertheless, a non-discursive space appropriate to “metaphysical” questioning will be reserved in the margins of the expressible. Wittgenstein calls this the mystical: “There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.” (6.522) (and “[n]ot *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is” (6.44)). What *cannot be said shows itself*; such is the somewhat enigmatic consequence of the Tractarian path.⁸ One could however conclude with a “naïve” reading of the set of propositions where Wittgenstein contradicts himself, since the first section of the work concerns questions of an eminently ontological nature. This is why we must of course be careful to read the *Tractatus*, despite its title, as a systematic *treatise*. We can see the Austrian philosopher situate a *partially* discursive progression towards “Ethics” at the heart of his undertaking. We can also suggest that the ontology of states of affairs sketched in the first section is only one step along the path that it tries to exceed.⁹ Nevertheless, it is difficult to systematically examine the Wittgensteinian critique of metaphysics in a non-aporetic way, precisely because the discourse of the *Tractatus* appears to exempt itself from the limits of the discursive system that the impalpable horizon of the “mystical” reveals. Moreover, the text from 1921, both so short and so dense, presents many hermeneutic difficulties that continue to sustain a prolific literature.¹⁰

From the *Tractatus*, the Vienna Circle¹¹ – a philosophical group active in the 1930s and formed especially around the emblematic figures of Carnap, Otto Neurath, and Moritz Schlick – maintained above all the maxim according to which “everything which can rightly be said can be said clearly”¹², and not the quietist conclusion Wittgenstein drew from it – the relations between Wittgenstein and the members of the Circle on this subject were quite ambivalent, as evidenced by one of Carnap’s notes.¹³ From this perspective, another step of the critique of metaphysics is made with the article published in 1931 in the journal *Erkenntnis*, “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language”, especially in response to Heidegger’s 1929 lecture, “What is Metaphysics?” Carnap claims in his article that “*the alleged statements in this domain [of metaphysics] are entirely meaningless.*” According to him, the statements of this “doctrine” have no true significance simply because they do not satisfy a certain number of necessary semantic and epistemological conditions. Carnap writes that to be significant, a sentence S which contains the word *a*, the elementary sentence S(*a*), must fulfill four conditions:

- (1) “The *empirical criteria* for *a* are known.”
- (2) “It has been stipulated from what protocol sentences ‘S(*a*)’ is *deducible*.”
- (3) “The *truth conditions* for ‘S(*a*)’ are fixed.”
- (4) “The method of *verification* of ‘S(*a*)’ is known.”¹⁴

For instance, words like “absolute”, “spirit”, “being-for-itself”, and even “being” *tout court* do not fulfill the first condition because they have no generally accepted empirical criteria (they can only be defined approximately by other words). Let us consider the following sentence:

Spirit knowing spirit is consciousness of itself; and is to itself in the form of objectivity. It is [...]¹⁵

The second condition is not fulfilled (the sentence is deducible from no protocol sentence), nor is the third condition, and certainly not the fourth condition. Therefore, Carnap concludes with the idea that metaphysical “pseudo-statements” are not the expression of existent states of affairs, but rather of a *Lebensgefühl*, of an “attitude towards life”.

The same kind of examination leads Schlick in “Erleben, Erkennen, Metaphysik”¹⁶ to

critique “the so-called ‘intuitive knowledge’ of the transcendent”. Since metaphysical intuition is neither the cognitive anticipation of a result which must then be duly proved (by mathematical intuition, for example), nor the flash of genius of the researcher in the field of empirical knowledge (such as Archimedes’ legendary “eureka!”), this is because it precedes from nothing other than mere “lived experience”: “the metaphysician has no wish to know things; he wants experience of them”, that is to say “by making them into contents of his consciousness”. Thus intuitive knowledge of the transcendent would be pure illusion, because the content of a lived experience is simply a content of consciousness, *immanent* by definition.¹⁷ It follows, according to Schlick, that knowledge is the domain restricted to the true sciences:

All knowledge of what exists is obtained in principle by the methods of the particular sciences; any other ‘ontology’ is empty babble.

It remains for the epistemically empty-handed metaphysician to turn towards “poetry and art and life itself, which multiply by their stimuli the wealth of contents of consciousness, of the immanent”.¹⁸

However, the validity of these critiques is contestable for an obvious reason: the conditions of verification imposed on metaphysical statements appear absurd, for even statements of theoretical physics, for example, are not expected to satisfy the same conditions. If the criticism that some philosophical prose is really just nonsense seems justified,¹⁹ it is utterly inadequate to extend this criticism to *every form* of metaphysics. Each form of metaphysics, far from necessarily culminating in mysticism or poetry, can be rational and systematic – a certain number of respectable philosophers, from Aristotle to Charles Sanders Peirce and beyond, have even understood metaphysics as *science* (see section 2). Let us summarize the criteria of Carnapian verificationism. The first condition rather vaguely concerns the nature of “empirical criterion”. Frédéric Nef remarks “that there is no empirical criterion of gravitation for Newton”.²⁰ The second condition is considerably problematic: do pure “protocol sentences” exist? Let us imagine that a chemist deduced from the protocol sentence P “the gauge indicates that there are 15 ml of solution in the test tube” a conclusion about the solubility of an element. On the one hand, P presupposes a set of concepts and scientific hypotheses (which do not depend on the protocol, but rather on the theory). On the other hand, such a sentence leaves itself open to subjectivism, for it strictly depends on the observer making the statement.²¹ The third condition clashes with epistemological holism which demands that the truth condition of a sentence depend on the truth condition of the group of sentences and of the theoretical framework in which it is produced. It is thus far from clear whether or not we can individually attribute truth conditions to a single sentence. Finally, the fourth condition, by including the necessity of knowing the “verification process” of the sentence, paralyzes the formulation of metaphysical hypotheses, which, by definition, are not empirically verifiable, but nevertheless can be systematically defended with the help of different formal and conceptual tools²² (see sections 6 through 8). Therefore, it seems difficult to accept the Carnapian criteria, which discredit as a whole many philosophical statements and even some scientific statements. Moreover, did not Carnap himself write as a metaphysician when he wrote *The Logical Structure of the World*,²³ thus coming within the scope of his own critiques?

Carnap’s article was explicitly directed against Heidegger’s equivocal expressions (think back to the famous analysis of the “pseudo-sentence” *das Nichts nichtet* [the Nothing nothings]). Heidegger was not slow to respond – without ever citing Carnap’s name – in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*:

In this journal [*Erkenntnis*, the journal of the Vienna Circle] has appeared a treatise entitled: “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language”. Here one completes

the extreme flattening and uprooting of the traditional doctrine of judgment through the semblance of mathematical scientificity.”²⁴

Ironically, however, it was Heidegger himself who adopted the originally Carnapian idea of an *Überwindung*, of an “overthrowing” of metaphysics. Richard Sylvan summarizes well this paradoxical *chassé-croisé* in the Germanic territory:

More than a little curiously, overthrowing of metaphysics also became an objective of German contemporaries of the Vienna circle, whose very work [...] offered paradigmatic examples of what the circle aimed likewise to demolish and bury forever. Heidegger, like Wittgenstein – by a procedure with some remarkable similarities, aimed at dissolving the questions – proposed to overcome metaphysics.²⁵

The Heideggerian critique is well-known. Metaphysics substitutes for the ontological question – the question of being – a twofold “ontic” question: what is the nature of common “beingness” (*ens commune*) for all beings? And what is, among beings, the supreme being (*summum ens*) at the foundation of the totality of being? It is through this surreptitious substitution that Western metaphysics would be constituted as “onto-theo-logy”, which amalgamates being either with what is common to every being (object of *metaphysica generalis*, or ontology), or with the highest being in the causal order, God (object of *metaphysica specialis*, or theology). Thus the being of being would remain unquestioned, unthought, because the “ontological difference” deployed by metaphysics since Aristotle brackets the famous *Seinsfrage*, the “question of being”.

In spite of this expeditious reconstruction, Heidegger’s relation to metaphysics and to its possible “exceeding” is particularly complex and ambiguous, all the more so due to its considerable development in the texts. We can attempt to reconstruct the course of this development in the clearest possible way in three stages. Heidegger had first planned on phenomenologically destroying traditional ontology, in order to put a more originary science in place to serve as a veritable foundation for philosophy – thus remaining faithful to the Husserlian project.²⁶ He successively named this undertaking, in the texts which immediately preceded and followed *Being and Time*, “originary theoretical science” (1919), “hermeneutics of facticity” (1923), then “analytic of existence” and “fundamental ontology” (1927). He then attempted, in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929), to define a “metaphysics of *Dasein* [...] not just [as] metaphysics about *Dasein*, but [as] the metaphysics which occurs necessarily *as Dasein*”.²⁷ The same year, in his seminar “What is Metaphysics?”, he declared that “Metaphysics is the fundamental occurrence in our *Dasein*. It is that *Dasein* itself”. Human being is the only being to originally possess a clear consciousness of *being*: human being is immediately *Dasein*, “Being-there”, disclosure of being beyond beings. As a consequence, Heidegger considered at this stage that true metaphysics must be deployed in the space opened by human *Dasein*, in a fundamental ontology comprising the anxiety of being faced with nothingness – such is the project expressed in *Being and Time*. But “the beingness” of *Dasein*, its ultimately ontic nature, would not know how to begin the ontological inquiry that Heidegger hoped for. The identification of metaphysics with *Dasein* appears as untenable, since it privileges a particular ontic being in order to think Being ontologically. Following the Carnapian attacks, the Freiburg philosopher thus radicalized his undertaking towards an “exceeding of metaphysics” (*Überwindung der Metaphysik*) explicitly expressed, as brought to light by its “onto-theo-logical formation” in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* in 1935. The thesis of onto-theo-logy would allow him to find the “still *unthought* unity of the essence [*Wesen*] of metaphysics”²⁸ in order to show the profound insufficiency of it: the forgetting of being. Finally, in his later work, Heidegger arrived at the thesis of the end of metaphysics, which would henceforth be surpassed by the essence of modern technology. Modern technology would therefore be the accomplishment of metaphysics, and metaphysics, in turn, would become the prehistory of

technology. Faced with the metamorphosis of metaphysics into modern technology, Heidegger recommended a *Verwindung* in place of the *Überwindung*: the pure and simple abandonment of metaphysics to itself, *without wanting to change anything in it* – to overcome (*verwinden*) rather than to go beyond or to exceed. In “Time and Being”, the last word of Heidegger on the subject is almost quietist, in the form of a double renunciation: renouncing the exceeding of metaphysics by purely and simply ceasing to take it into consideration:

To think Being without beings means: to think Being without regard to metaphysics. Yet a regard for metaphysics still prevails even in the intention to overcome metaphysics. Therefore, our task is to cease all overcoming, and leave metaphysics to itself.²⁹

What can one conclude from the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics and its successive transformations? In its first form, namely the destruction of traditional ontology in favor of an existential analytic of *Dasein*, it comes within the scope of the Carnapian critique, in the sense that, reformed in light of the experiences of Husserlian phenomenology, the project of this metaphysics culminated well and truly in the expression of a *Lebensgefühl*, that, in a somewhat arbitrary way, places anxiety and being-for-death at the heart of the “question of being”. One can undoubtedly claim, following Franco Volpi, that

Carnap was preoccupied with establishing the *truth conditions* of philosophical discourse, while Heidegger, abstracting from the problem of validity, by sometimes freely crossing the limits of language, determined to show how *disclosures of meaning* take place.³⁰

But that is certainly the problem. Heidegger ignores the question of his discourse’s *validity* and, in a general way avoids all *epistemological* examination concerning metaphysical knowledge, which would only serve to elevate, following Henri Bergson, the role of intuition. Moreover, it would be very easy to refer it to the mysterious “disclosure of meaning” which one would be hard pressed to give a precise definition of. The thesis of the “ontotheological” formation is undeniably interesting in that it offers an original reading of the history of metaphysics since Aristotle. However, it does not withstand a thorough historical examination, as numerous works have shown.³¹ Let us quote Jean-François Courtine, who cannot be accused of not understanding the Heideggerian project, nor of being hostile towards him:

It is important to critique the unproductive violence of what Janicaud had quite justifiably named the destinal historicism [of the ontotheological formation]. To broaden the concept of metaphysics beyond the ontotheological could then concretely mean: to develop once again a vast and differentiated concept in order to attribute it to philosophers who, especially in the neo-Platonist tradition, were devoted to thinking the One beyond being [...].³²

We ought to wonder about what Heidegger offers in place of the metaphysical tradition led astray by ontotheology. The response is far from evident, and Heidegger’s texts prove to be particularly ambiguous on this point, since his philosophy, as Pierre Aubenque writes, leads to “an unachievable hermeneutics, which never leads to an intuition which would put an end to the conflict of interpretations [of the discourses on being] by proving some and disproving others”.³³ Ultimately, Heideggerian ontology is resolved – is dissolved – in a “history” of being, that is to say, in a historico-hermeneutic approach to the question of being.³⁴ This is why, in the last analysis, one could argue that Heidegger’s decisive contribution was not that he “exceeded” or “overcame” metaphysics, but that he founded long-term historical work on the evolution of the “question of being”, which was constituted, one could say, paraphrasing Whitehead, by a series of notes (and misinterpretations!) on the writings of Plato and Aristotle. On this point, Jean-François Courtine’s work on Suárez and above all on the genesis of the *analogia entis*³⁵ are paradigmatic, that is, the

Heideggerian project is recuperated by the project of an “archeology”³⁶ of the problem of being, in a perspective aimed towards the future of metaphysics:

Why is the ‘archeological’ question discussed today, after the end of the ‘end’ of metaphysics? To attempt to respond to this question involves risking several ‘important’ hypotheses that we intend to submit to critical discussion: the ‘archeological’ question, by the very formation of the question, always presupposes something like a post-Kantian, post-Nietzschean, and, above all, post-Heideggerian horizon, within which only the status of metaphysics and of its fundamental project is determined. In other words, the ‘archeological’ objective presupposes the possibility, and, no doubt, the necessity of a ‘repetition’ of metaphysics, of ontology, and of the question of being.³⁷

It is no doubt here where we can locate the real, or at least the most contemporary, posterity of the Heideggerian project, which paradoxically involves a rigorous critique of the Heideggerian reading of the history of metaphysics.

Let us examine the final stage of the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics, which claims quite simply “to overcome” metaphysics: it is not difficult to discern the impasse that this attitude of indecision or indifference leads to. The Heideggerian formulation of the problem of being, at this stage, avoids the concepts of metaphysics, ontology, and even *Dasein*, in order to address the much more elusive notion of *Ereignis*, “event”, “occurrence”.³⁸ Pierre Aubenque summarizes this final shift, which resembles a renunciation:

Little by little, Heidegger [renounced] the nostalgia of the origin [of the meaning of being], and the pretense of finding it again. The thought about being had always already begun, since being is always already there, not as a being already present, but as an *event* always already appearing and therefore non-datable.³⁹

In truth, the final analysis of the “question of being” appears largely aporetic, for it only leads to a form of radical limitation on philosophical discourse that does not fail to remind us of the Wittgensteinian characterization of the inexpressible.⁴⁰

After Heidegger, phenomenology takes a “hermeneutic turn”⁴¹ which radicalizes certain tendencies of the author of *Being and Time*⁴², while changing vocabulary and terrain. *Against* Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur affirm the plurivocity of metaphysics. For the former “there is absolutely not a language of metaphysics”, but rather “there are only metaphysical concepts, whose content is determined by their use”⁴³, whereas the latter refuses “the convenience, which has become a laziness in thinking, of lumping the whole of Western thought together under a single word, metaphysics”.⁴⁴ The hermeneutic project does not repeat the catchword – the end itself or the exceeding – of the prophecies of the end of metaphysics, but instead emphasizes the temporal and historical character of our relation to being. Gadamer maintains the idea that metaphysical questions are *Lebensfragen*,⁴⁵ “vital” questions, and for this reason, *unavoidable* questions. However, according to him, this questioning élan makes us aspire to know what is beyond all knowledge, outside of reach: “the *ignoramus* is the fundament of transcendence.”⁴⁶ Unlike science, metaphysics therefore allows no real progress: we must limit ourselves to a metaphysics of finitude. Empowered by this Kantian denunciation of the unknowable, Gadamer characterizes metaphysics above all as *attitude*. These are the “echoes of human experiences, which [...], from the lived world, make us understand the relation to the transcendent or to the divine.”⁴⁷ Once more, this definition of metaphysics comes within the scope of the criticisms of the Vienna Circle. Metaphysics is thought of as a human activity that is valued only as an experience of “astonishment” when faced with the strangeness of the world, for “it is precisely in asking these unanswerable questions that we affirm our humanity.”⁴⁸ Elsewhere, the tone becomes almost soteriological:

[M]etaphysics signifies an opening into a dimension which, endless as time itself and flowing presence as time itself, embraces all our questions, our saying and hoping.⁴⁹

Behind this impassioned celebration of a metaphysics with a human face hides a radical weakening of its meaning and role. Nevertheless, at this price the possibility of metaphysics is maintained. The Derridean project of deconstruction is not as charitable. Derrida wanted to radicalize the critique that, according to him, Heidegger had not been capable of completing. However, he thinks that one cannot invalidate metaphysics as false, since one would have to make use of a concept of truth that is itself bound by metaphysics. Our time, Derrida writes, is marked by an event that coincides with the advent of structural linguistics: the liberation of writing vis-à-vis the tutelage of logocentrism. Structuralism excludes the speaker in order to exclusively consider language as a system of signs caught in their reciprocal relations (and not in reference to an extra-linguistic signified). This “event” is the sign of a liberation from “presence”:

By alluding to a[n ancient] science of writing reined in by metaphor, metaphysics, and theology, [one sees] that the [new] science of writing – *grammatology* – shows signs of liberation all over the world, as a result of decisive efforts.⁵⁰

The Heideggerian inspiration of the deconstruction of metaphysics becomes clear by its emphasis on its *historical* determination:

The unity of all that allows itself to be attempted today through the most diverse concepts of science and of writing, is, in principle, more or less covertly yet always, determined by an historico-metaphysical epoch of which we merely glimpse the *closure*.⁵¹

Nevertheless, Derrida is confronted with the “problem of the status of a discourse that borrows from the tradition instruments that he needs in order to deconstruct this very tradition.”⁵² This is why every Derridean enterprise is marked by a negative philosophy, that is to say, by a philosophy that proceeds by differentiating itself from tradition and “institutional” discursivity. The author of the *Grammatology* confesses that it is impossible to define deconstruction without ruining the very project of it, for operating at the heart of this project is the “notion” of *différance*, which is not properly speaking a concept, but a “non-concept”. Pierre Aubenque locates three origins of *différance*:⁵³

- (1) Heidegger’s ontological difference: the difference between Being concealed and the being that one claims to substitute in its place.
- (2) Saussure’s linguistic difference: language is defined as a system of differences, since only semiotic differences are producers of meaning.
- (3) Neo-Platonist *diastasis*, which corresponds to the active meaning of *diastèma*, “the interval”, “the distance”; this meaning appears in the Plotinian and Augustinian definitions of time as *distensio animi*.

According to Pierre Aubenque, we can therefore attempt to summarize the Derridean critique of metaphysics – even if doing so undoubtedly does some violence to it:

Metaphysics closes, encloses difference: difference between being and beings, *différance* as ecstatic temporalization, difference as condition of meaning. For difference, metaphysics substitutes the *presence* of a fundamental or substantial principle: *ousia*, *parousia*, transcendental signified. For ecstatic *Dasein*, which does not know itself (man, Kant already said, is only the phenomenon of himself), metaphysics superimposes and finally substitutes the

substantiality of the subject, *hypo-keimenon*, *subjectum*, owner of itself.⁵⁴

Through this “assessment”, and to validate it by example, Derrida intends to employ the tool of deconstruction as a “bricolage”, “which comes down to using, as instruments, fortuitously encountered elements that have a different purpose than one employs them for: for example, to finish demolishing a house with materials salvaged from the collapse of the house itself.”⁵⁵ But to what extent can we take seriously this “internal subversion of concepts”? Is not the emancipation announced as liberating towards all the canonical criteria of rationality, the open door to a smug and chaotic logorrhea? Moreover, do we not run the risk, in the name of the seductive imperative of subversion, of isolating and of arbitrarily overstating contingent details of this or that metaphysical discourse? All these questions are always asked by a critical reader of Derrida. Several studies⁵⁶ have elsewhere shown the logical inconsistencies that dangerously punctuate his texts, without mentioning his pronounced tendency towards Hermeticism to the detriment of the clarity of reasoning – all that, of course, in the name of a refusal to submit to the alienating norms of traditional rationality.⁵⁷ The impossibility of defining key terms such as deconstruction or *différance*, other than through metaphors and neologisms, reveals a real difficulty for Derrida in developing a *systematic* critique of metaphysics without entering into an obscure “beyond” that exempts the discourse from every logical and argumentative structure. In short, we can legitimately be doubtful of the validity of this procedure, for even though the philistines of deconstruction claim to have a monopoly on philosophical modernity, especially in the field of literary studies, deconstruction, in fact, became an institutional language, which, moreover, has yet to be toppled.

The last significant post-Heideggerian avatar in the exceeding of metaphysics can undoubtedly be sought in Jürgen Habermas, who was particularly explicit on the question. Indeed he coined the expression “postmetaphysical thought” in 1988.⁵⁸ The reasons why we have at our disposal “no alternative solution to postmetaphysical thinking” are, according to him, four in number:

- (1) The appearance of a “new type of procedural rationality” calls into question the primacy of “totalizing thinking that aims at the one and the whole”.
- (2) The “detranscendentalization of inherited basic concepts” linked to the advent of the historical and hermeneutic sciences in the nineteenth century reflects “the new experiences of time and contingency within an ever more complex modern society”.
- (3) The reification of forms of life, as well as an objectivistic view of science and technology, are criticized from then on, foreshadowing a “shift in paradigms from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language”.
- (4) The primacy of theory over practice is called into question by the access of “everyday contexts of action and communication” to a philosophical dignity.⁵⁹

The presuppositions of such a discourse are numerous. In the first place, the implicit definition of metaphysics is based on certain more or less arbitrary characteristics: the primacy of the model of relations between subject and object, the primacy of the totalizing discourse regarding the One and the Whole, the primacy of theory over practice. Thus, at the very least, a schematization of Hegelian dialectics acts as a model to obsolete metaphysics. Moreover, Habermas admits that he neglects, “in a rough simplification [...] the Aristotelian line”, and that he identifies metaphysics with “the thinking of a philosophical idealism”⁶⁰ extending, according to him, from Plato to Hegel. Faced with the new contemporary irrationalism that he condemns in Jaspers, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Adorno, Habermas judges that it is necessary not to reestablish (rationalist) metaphysics, but to substitute for it a “situated reason” cognizant of the transformation of rationality in our modern societies. Yet, Frédéric Nef comments:

[P]arallel to this irrationalist current, which is certainly the most visible and the most popular [...] a multitude of currents in metaphysics emerged that accounted for the problems raised by Habermas (finitude, secularization, loss of the primacy of theory, etc.), from the metaphysical pragmatism of a Peirce to Husserl's formal ontology, via all the developments of neo-Meinongianism, Whitehead's process metaphysics, the renaissance of debates about the validity of transcendental arguments in the normative sciences, etc. They were at least enough to thwart contemporary irrationalism, which is perhaps a mass effect.⁶¹

In addition to these historical considerations, we can wonder about the validity of Habermasian reasoning when it relies on general and little justified declarations about modern "rationality", or even about the supposed necessity of "deflating the extra-ordinary", discreetly expressing a fetishization – even a mythification – of the everyday that Heidegger is known for. In the last analysis, the *Zeitgeist*, "the spirit of the times", remains Habermas' obscure horizon, which serves to condemn the vanity of a rehabilitation of metaphysics: what good is it struggling against his time, while at the same time pretending to ignore the *evident* obsolescence of the old metaphysics? This so-called (strategic) evidence was really just an unquestioned prejudice lacking support.

After having provided a broad outline of Wittgenstein's, Carnap's, and Heidegger's theses, and some "post-Heideggerian" critiques of metaphysics, we will now treat two anti-metaphysical positions that are firmly anchored in the analytic tradition and still occasionally defended. The first corresponds to what is usually called "ordinary language philosophy", and is inherited from the work of the later Wittgenstein. The main postulate can be summarized in the following way: a careful analysis of ordinary language allows the "dissolution" of traditional philosophical problems. In 1932, the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle insisted on the idea that this type of analysis of language can clarify our mode of thought by eliminating inappropriate linguistic forms:⁶² philosophical problems are born from a misinterpretation of our ordinary use of language. The main task of philosophy would therefore be to map out, so to speak, our conceptual schema *according to their ordinary use*, and to eventually correct our misunderstanding of these schema. In that sense, ordinary language philosophy is contrasted with "ideal language" philosophy, sometimes said to be embodied by the tradition of Frege, Russell, and Carnap. In his 1932 article, Ryle examines the harmful role of what he calls "systematically misleading expressions", which he states have two characteristics:

- (1) These expressions are perfectly understood by those who make a non-philosophical use of them.
- (2) However, their grammatical form improperly characterizes the facts that they refer to.

These expressions are really "misleading" because their improper form does not appear in their ordinary use. In addition, this fallacious character is "systematic" because "all expressions of that grammatical form [are] misleading in the same way and for the same reason".⁶³ The role of the philosopher is to clarify what is vaguely understood in ordinary communication. Ryle castigates the illusory tendency towards abstraction and generalization among metaphysicians that leads them to misinterpret statements of ordinary language – for example, to understand the statements "Capone is not a philosopher" and "Satan does not exist" in the same way.⁶⁴ In the same way, Ryle attributes the metaphysical debate about universals to a "category error". The metaphysical debate would indeed result from the misleading parallelism between statements such as "Jean had given himself the prize" and "Virtue is its own reward" – the correct expression of the second statement being: "Anyone who is virtuous is benefited thereby". More generally, ordinary language philosophy, in its most radical form, sets about revealing the vanity of certain (or even most) metaphysical debates.

What good is it to ask if the tables exist *per se*, or if they are mere aggregates of elementary particles? On a daily basis, we make paradigmatic use of the word “table” to refer to entities possessing a proper existence; therefore, ordinary language teaches us that tables exist. To wonder about the existence of the external world, or about mind-body dualism,⁶⁵ etc., is equally vain: thus, metaphysicians quarrel about chimera. However, the classical objection to this type of critique of metaphysics appears entirely legitimate: why must the ordinary use of language be the measuring stick of metaphysical inquiry? Why must “ordinary language”, which essentially helps us to communicate, inform us – better than, for example, rational inquiry – about the ultimate nature of reality and the entities that it is composed of? The physicist does not care about knowing if the ordinary use of the word “table” corresponds adequately to the nature of this or that aggregate of particles that we designate with this word; and neither should the metaphysician worry excessively about postulating, *for reasons that are not linked to our use of language*, autonomous entities such as universals.⁶⁶

The last position that it is necessary for us to examine corresponds to what is generally called “anti-realism”, and which can take either semantic form or pragmatic form. The term “anti-realism” indicates an apparent confusion among analytics between the critique of metaphysical *realism*, that is to say, of the thesis of the autonomy of the external world, and the critique of metaphysics *tout court*. We will understand this problem better if we remember that the analytic tradition was born from a revolt against idealism (see section 4) and also that metaphysical realism widely prevails today among analytic philosophers. Nevertheless, in addition to these *de facto* considerations, it turns out that contemporary anti-realism leads to a devaluation, sometimes very violent, of metaphysics in general. For example, Hilary Putnam defends a form of “conceptual pluralism” (which he later calls “conceptual relativity”).⁶⁷ We can summarize this position in the following way: we can speak a certain number of different languages, such that (1) different existential statements prove to be true in these languages, due to the fact that ontological expressions (equivalent to “there are”, “there exist”, etc.) express different concepts of existence in them, and (2) these languages can each describe the facts of the world equally well. Thus, to take the example of the problem of universals (the question being: “do the universals, such as red, modesty, or roundness, exist independently of their instantiations?”), the thesis of nominalism will be true in some languages (the statement “universals exist” and its expressions will be false in these languages), and the thesis of the realism of universals – or Platonism – will be true in other languages (the statement “universals exist” and its expressions will be true in these languages). However, all these different languages describe the world literally as it is. According to the thesis of conceptual pluralism, it follows that metaphysical problems are vain or groundless. This conclusion is not derived from linguistic criteria, as it is for Carnap, but instead from a *pragmatist* examination of the use of our concepts of existence. For example, Putnam considers the case of two philosophers debating about the existence of mereological sums,⁶⁸ one of them hoping to employ the verb “to exist” in such a way that she is allowed to assert that mereological sums exist, and the other rejecting this use. According to Putnam, these two individuals debate about something important when the first declares that the mereological sums exist, and the second that they do not exist. However, they are *not* in disagreement, or at least should not be, on the question of knowing if the mereological sums *really exist*. In reality, their disagreement concerns the extension of the use of the concept of existence, and our two metaphysicians debate about the adoption or not of a particular, optional language. For example, Putnam writes bluntly:

[T]he question [of knowing] whether mereological sums “really exist” is a silly question. It is *literally* a matter of convention whether we decide to say [or not to say] that they exist.⁶⁹

Metaphysics is only *chimaera bombillans in vacuo*. Consequently, publishing the “obituary” of ontology, Putnam concludes, “since it *is* customary to say at least one good word about the dead”:

[E]ven if ontology has become a stinking corpse, in Plato and Aristotle it represented the vehicle for conveying many genuine philosophical insights. These insights still preoccupy all of us in philosophy who have any historical sense at all. But the vehicle has long since outlived its usefulness.⁷⁰

Although it seems indisputable that every kind of knowledge contains some element of convention, we have no guarantee that what we today call a convention ought not to be one day abandoned, perhaps for a reason that we are incapable of anticipating today – this idea fits well with Putnam’s fallibilism. Putnam’s fallibilism assigns to philosophy the goal of attaining a set of necessary truths while remaining in a *fallibilist* context, rather than giving in to the sirens of scepticism. Yet as Claudine Tiercelin emphasizes, it is difficult to simultaneously maintain a preference for common sense realism, of pragmatist inspiration, that guarantees us an access to truth – in a minimal way – and for fallibilism: we must at some point stop trying to justify our knowledge. The appeal to common sense is moreover in no way incompatible with the patient and systematic elaboration of a metaphysics worthy of the name. Charles Sanders Peirce, whose work provides evidence for this, suggested founding his realist scientific metaphysics on a *critical* conception of common sense.⁷¹

What conclusions can we draw from this brief tour of the horizon and desert landscape that it seems to reveal to us on the ancestral lands of metaphysics? “Metaphysics is dead. Long live metaphysics!”: this could be the tragicomic conclusion of the pavane for a dead queen, but it is not the last word of philosophy. We can undoubtedly admit that all these critiques are full of lessons, that their value is not purely polemical and negative, and that, if metaphysics escapes alive, it will emerge grown from it. Frédéric Nef warns the reader at the beginning of his study:

One ought to clear up a misunderstanding, encouraged by the mediocrity of certain debates about the relation to the past. In no way is this work about restoring the metaphysics of the Ancients, nor even of the Moderns, of completely reestablishing the native rights of traditional metaphysics. Kant’s critiques concerning general metaphysics disconnected from every relation to experience, Nietzsche’s critiques concerning the utilization of certain metaphysical themes, diverted from their theoretical finality, to moralist or spiritualist ends, Carnap’s critiques, perhaps the most radical, when they concern precisely the pseudo-liberation vis-à-vis minimal criteria of rationality and not the *a priori* impossibility of sensible metaphysical statements, are perfectly valid. Metaphysics cannot turn its back on experience, favor an unhealthy cult of things of the soul and of the mind, nor substitute wordplay for analysis and for argument.⁷²

To adopt the cause of metaphysics is not to remain blind to the limits of its mode of knowledge and its field of study. But to read all the texts that we have examined, it may seem that the criticisms are insurmountable. However, an initial response to this hypothesis must emphasize the irreducibility of metaphysics: “close the door right in its face / through windows it returns with ease”,⁷³ as the natural in La Fontaine’s pleasant expression. But without laboriously going on and on about the natural speculator of the *animal metaphysicum*, we will emphasize that it is quite difficult to attempt to eliminate metaphysics without (1) accomplishing in this very attempt a metaphysical gesture, and (2) implicitly assuming various metaphysical presuppositions that will remain unnoticed, since they are not explicitly demonstrated and corrected. Thus, even philosophical currents that have historically become more or less hostile to metaphysics must be suspicious of the radicality of such a dismissal. For the record, let us mention Jean-Luc Marion’s call to prudence:

In the field of thought, the choices do not manifest themselves so simply, between two mutually exclusive terms. This would mean falling back once again into a superficial and thoughtless polemical treatment of the question of metaphysics, by limiting oneself to such a dichotomy –

metaphysics or phenomenology, metaphysics or deconstruction, metaphysics or nihilism, etc.⁷⁴

To get at the root of the problem, perhaps we must rid ourselves of what Jocelyn Benoist rightly condemns in the name of a “rhetoric of exceeding”.⁷⁵ The ambiguity of the hackneyed theme of exceeding seems to lie in the fact that it simultaneously declares the saturation of a tradition, its announced end – the exceeding being dependent on a completion⁷⁶ – and something like a *forced march* progress of philosophy.⁷⁷ Hilary Putnam aims right by recalling that “the true task of philosophy [...] is not to rest frozen in a gesture of repudiation that is as empty as what it repudiates”.⁷⁸ Moreover, there is often some rejoicing in this gesture, and the death of metaphysics does not go without a lugubrious carnival celebrating the loss as a liberation (Derrida, Habermas) or as a recovery (Wittgenstein, Ryle, Austin). But it is easy to see that the “event” of “the spirit of the century” is built with all the pieces. In this regard, the more the expressions are peremptory – think back to the great archetypal phrases about the *evidence* and the *obvious necessity* of an exceeding of metaphysics – the more the statement is suspect. If “a fine gentlemanly tone in contemporary metaphysics”⁷⁹ exists, assuredly a fine gentlemanly tone for the anti-metaphysical philosopher also exists: he who makes himself the prophet of his time or the doctor of an deleterious situation in order to scoff at the naïveté of those who still pose traditional questions.

But let us pass over the procedure. Is it necessary to abandon metaphysics to history on the grounds that it is no longer compatible with our disenchanted world or our comprehension of language?

Nothing is less sure. For, once more, the greatest difficulty in metaphysics is not to construct a metaphysics, nor to proclaim its end, but rather it is to define its true object, the legitimacy of its method, the validity or not of its presence next to the other sciences, in short, to determine what can, still today, not only explain but also and above all justify what one does with it.⁸⁰

Claudine Tiercelin’s commentary summarizes the core of the problem very well: metaphysics is a living and universally practiced discipline; the responsibility of criticism must not only be to examine its very possibility, but the designation and the (de)limitation of its object. Therefore, the dilemma concerns the importance that we hope to give to metaphysics, and the epistemological foundations of rational inquiry from which it proceeds, rather than its existence strictly speaking. Notwithstanding, if we seek a proof of the vitality of metaphysics, it is enough to recall that in the most somber hours of logical positivism or of Heideggerian *Verwindung*, it had its “resistants” – let us mention notably, on the analytic side, G. F. Stout, C. D. Broad, H. H. Price, D. C. Williams, and C. J. Ducasse, and on the European side, C. Stumpf, R. Ingarden, and N. Hartmann, whose work remains invaluable and passionate. Today – and since the 1960s – metaphysics is again flourishing and prolix, especially in the “analytic” world.

Let us reassure ourselves: metaphysics lives, and is ready to indefinitely seek reprieve against those who sentence it to death. It remains for us to consider, in all fairness, what has become of this discipline that has miraculously survived.

2. What (nowadays) is metaphysics?

Frédéric Nef’s work – cited above – responds to this difficult question in depth and in detail.⁸¹ Without aspiring to the same degree of precision and erudition, we can make some general remarks on this far-reaching subject of inquiry. The most striking aspect of contemporary metaphysics – or at least of the work that unfolds in this field of philosophical investigation – is no doubt that it appears in quite varied forms. If it is rather difficult to find a consensus on the

definition of metaphysics, it is no surprise that the very term was born under the sign of a constant ambiguity. We know that the word “metaphysics” comes from the Latin *metaphysica*, itself coined belatedly, according to the heading given in the first century BCE by the late scholar, Andronicus of Rhodes, to books that come after the *Physics* in his edition of Aristotle’s works: “*ta meta ta phusika*”, literally “the books that come after those that treat physical things”.⁸² Thereafter, philological derivations give the meaning “beyond physics” to the term “metaphysics” – completely incompatible with the classical Greek. Is metaphysics a study of entities, physical or not, that exist from the mere fact that they *are* – the study of being *qua* being, or only beings as they are – or is it strictly speaking a *transphysics*, a discipline that devotes itself to what is beyond the sensible? This ambivalence, which it would be too simplistic to reduce to a disagreement between Aristotle and Plato, traverses the entire history of metaphysics up to the present. The Latin “*ontologia*” (or “*ontosophia*”) emerges from a relatively recent neologism, the first recorded occurrences of which date from 1606-1613, and its meaning is not always clearly defined by contemporary authors. This is why, without going deeper into this history that fuels an extensive literature, we must proceed to the demanding exercise of clarifying, as much as possible, the working contemporary definitions of metaphysics and ontology.

Let us note straightaway that the inter-definition of metaphysics and ontology is itself a source of ambiguity – without even mentioning the further complications caused by frequent instances when the two terms are indifferently used. Attempting to untangle the inextricable knot, Achille C. Varzi⁸³ points out two coherent ways of approaching the question, in both cases subscribing to the primacy of ontology over metaphysics:

- (1) (a) Ontology consists in saying *that which is [quid]*, i.e., by taking stock of the furniture of the world.
- (b) Metaphysics consists in saying *that which it is [quod]*, i.e., in determining the nature or essence of entities that we have first established the existence of.
- (2) (a) Ontology is occupied with the totality of that which is *possible*.
- (b) Metaphysics is occupied with the totality of that which is *actual*.

According to the first proposition (1), prevailing among analytic metaphysicians, ontology seeks to establish an exhaustive classification of the types of entities that exist. Therefore, it consists in posing questions of the type: do relations, properties, substances, material objects, universals, individuals, numbers, events, classes, mereological sums, contradictory objects, a Prime Mover, etc. exist? Must we include, for example, *tables*, *family reunions*, and *courage* in our assessment of the world, or quite simply arrangements of elementary particles that in such a material configuration form what we call “tables”, or that in this circumstance or from this to that moment form what we call “family reunions”, or in another circumstance form what we call “courageous persons” (without tables, family reunions, and courage having any existence in themselves except as concepts)? Always according to the pair of definitions (1), metaphysics, in contrast, must establish *what are these things that are*. Metaphysics poses questions such as: what are the conditions of identity and persistence through time of material objects? What are their essential properties? What is the nature of universals, of time, etc.?

The second proposition (2) at the beginning corresponds to a more marginal position that has its roots in Alexius Meinong, but is explicitly expressed by Roman Ingarden⁸⁴ and picked up by Bergmann, Johansson, Grossmann, and Chisholm. According to this pair of definitions, the role of ontology is to determine, *independently of what really exists*, all the kinds of *possible* entities – or, as Ingarden says, the possible “modes of existence” of beings. Indeed, one can make ontological decisions only in the most general and most neutral possible framework, by studying all the available “alternatives”. According to the pair of definitions (1), ontology proceeds “blindly” and

“piece by piece”⁸⁵ (postulating that one type of entity exists and not another before saying *what it is*). The risk of this method is that it allows the metaphysician to trust in “intuitions”, which hardly have material credibility – the fact that one can be convinced of the existence of abstract objects is not a valid argument in favor of their concrete existence. In addition, the proposed inventory has every chance of being lacunary. On the other hand, the pair of definitions (2) assign a much larger field of investigation to ontology, in order to then be entirely free, in the framework of *metaphysical* inquiry, to determine which types of possible entities really exist.

Therefore, there are two very different ways of asserting the primacy of ontology over metaphysics, according to the definition that we gave of these two terms. Let us come back for a moment to the first proposition, which, to repeat, is the prevailing position. One of the clearest and most adequate definitions of ontology (1a), though not the most original, is Barry Smith’s:

Ontology as a branch of philosophy is the science of what is, of the kinds and structures of objects, properties, events, processes, and relations in every area of reality. [...] Ontology seeks to provide a definitive and exhaustive classification of entities in all spheres of being. The classification should be definitive in the sense that it can serve as an answer to such questions as: What classes of entities are needed for a complete description and explanation of all the goings-on in the universe? Or: What classes of entities are needed to give an account of what makes true all truths? It should be exhaustive in the sense that all types of entities should be included in the classification, including also the types of relations by which entities are tied together to form larger wholes.⁸⁶

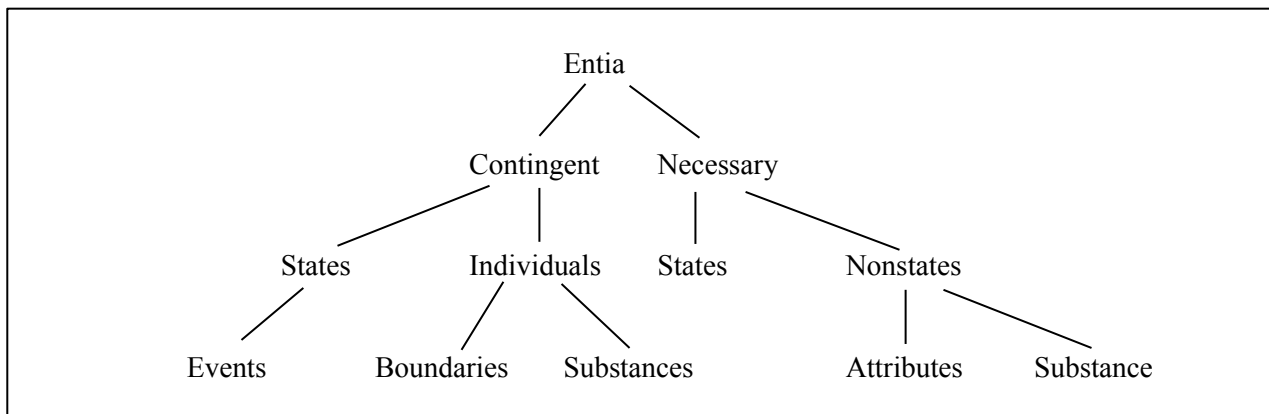
When Smith speaks about exhaustive inventory, of course, one must not conclude that ontology is occupied with drawing up a complete list of all the particular entities of our world, but rather that it categorizes the types of entities that we can include in the catalog of being. The role of metaphysics is then to precisely formulate the conditions of existence of these types: for example, if events exist, then we will ask under what conditions an event exists, what is its mode of occurrence, its mode of persistence through time, its relations with material objects, etc. In a similar way, in the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl distinguishes formal ontology from material ontology: formal ontology is occupied with beings in general, while material ontology is occupied with features and specific sectors of reality (in the way that today we talk about the ontology of mathematics, ontology of physics, social ontology, etc.).⁸⁷ One could object – and a certain number of naturalist philosophers do not hesitate to do so – that the inventory of the world, which ontology is supposed to be responsible for, is the domain allotted to science, and notably to theoretical physics: it is in the hands of science to pronounce judgments on the existence of elementary particles (or fields), on the nature of visual perception, on the existence of the void, etc. However, we can provide at least three good reasons why ontology is not reducible to the natural sciences:⁸⁸

- (1) Ontology does not only pronounce judgments on the existence of material things studied by physics, but also on the existence of *immaterial* entities (spirit, numbers, propositions, events, universals, etc.).
- (2) Physics certainly studies the elementary “bricks” of reality, but nothing tells us that reality is uniquely constituted by these minimal elements, nor that, to take up this classical example once more, tables are not something more than particles of which they are composed. In addition, if physics studies the “bricks” of the world, metaphysics in the same way studies the “cement” of things, to take up Emile Meyerson’s expression – especially necessary, non-physical relations (supervenience, emergence, existential dependence, compresence, etc.).
- (3) Finally, even reducing the totality of reality to physical interactions does not mean that physics can avoid implicit ontological commitments that ontology must reveal; this is precisely Quine’s important contribution to this question.

Let us add that Claudine Tiercelin, picking up Kevin Mulligan’s analysis, coherently synthesizes these different definitions of ontology by joining them to a meta-ontological component that we have not yet tackled:

Ontology responds to four major kinds of questions: (1) ontology can be understood as the study of our ontological engagements, that is to say, of what we are committed to; (2) ontology can be understood very widely as the study of what there is, or, more precisely, (3) as the study of the most general characteristics of what is and of the most general way in which the things that are are related to each other; (4) finally, ontology can concentrate on the (most meta-ontological) task of saying what ontology should accomplish, or even how it must understand the question that it is supposed to respond to and with what methodology.⁸⁹

Therefore, ontology thus understood has a largely taxonomical role, elaborating an arborescent hierarchy of types of entities, which explains the renaissance of a categorical approach to metaphysics within analytic philosophy. Let us mention, for example, without entering into the details of its choices and implications, Roderick Chisholm’s (1996) hierarchy:



In principle, all the entities of reality should be capable of being subsumed under one of these categories and should correspond to a single branch of the tree – each branch being almost infinitely extendable through more and more subtle distinctions, until the list is exhaustive. Let us note that this type of taxonomical approach to ontology was already developed in the seventeenth century when the term emerged.

However, we have not exhausted – far from it – the possible definitions of metaphysics and ontology. In particular, we have neglected a fundamental distinction, since Wolff (*Philosophia prima sive Ontologia*, 1729) and Kant, between *general metaphysics* and *special metaphysics*. General metaphysics is strictly identified with ontology, that is to say, according to Wolff’s terms, with “the part of philosophy that is occupied with being in general”. According to this definition, ontology responds simultaneously to the question “what there is?” and “what it is?”, since it is occupied with extracting the most universal features of reality. Special metaphysics, on the other hand, includes three disciplines: rational theology, whose object is God, rational cosmology, whose object is the world, and rational psychology, whose object is the soul. The objects of special metaphysics are always studied in some way, but the cohesiveness of its practice has been fragmented. Today the task of rational theology is found in natural theology, which is partly connected to ontology, and continues to ask traditional questions about the existence and nature of God. Rational psychology more or less corresponds to contemporary philosophy of mind, which is adjacent to the neurosciences and cognitive sciences on the one hand, and to ontology on the other. On the other hand, the inquiry of rational cosmology is nowadays largely taken up by astrophysics.

We can nevertheless propose to update the definition of special metaphysics by including in its fields of study, for example, the problems of philosophy of mind, those of free will, those of philosophy of action, those of natural theology, and those of perception.

Let us mention a final contemporary distinction between descriptive metaphysics and prescriptive or revisionist metaphysics (sometimes called “reformist” metaphysics). The first, illustrated principally by P. F. Strawson,⁹⁰ is situated in the Kantian lineage, and limits the activity of metaphysics to describing our conceptual schema, our cognitive system. Prescriptive metaphysics, on the other hand, is devoted to determining the fundamental categories in which reality is articulated independently of our image of it or our use of language, in order to consequently *revise* our conceptual schema if they are insufficient. It is clear that the widely prevailing prescriptive conception of metaphysics goes hand in hand with a realist commitment to our knowledge of the external world, whereas the descriptive conception tends towards maintaining a form of neo-Kantian anti-realism.

Are these different definitions valid outside of the framework of analytic metaphysics? The question of the divide between analytics and non-analytics, which we will have the occasion to return to in detail, is particularly perceptible in the field of metaphysics. Does it make sense to talk about “continental metaphysics” as we talk about analytic metaphysics? It is thoroughly debatable, inasmuch as it seems difficult to define the cohesiveness of non-analytic metaphysics, if we exclude general methodological and historical considerations that would also be applied to non-analytic *philosophy* as a whole. However, a forthcoming work explicitly announces its ambition “to sketch out a *continental metaphysics* that is not in contradiction with philosophies of immanence”⁹¹ – here we can see a somewhat indecisive attempt to negatively outline, relative to the comparative methodological and conceptual coherence of analytic metaphysics, the cohesiveness of a specifically continental metaphysics.⁹²

The first remark that we can make on this subject is to sketch out three approaches of “metaphysics” in non-analytic territory. The first is essentially *historical*, or historico-hermeneutic (practicing the exegesis of the grand texts of Western metaphysics), and rarely displays a “constructive” (in the neutral sense of the term) ambition towards contemporary philosophy. The question is not so much whether this thesis of Avicenna is more adequate or better argued than that antagonistic thesis of Averroes, than it is a question of attempting to assess the difference between these two theses, their influences and their descendants, often in an holistic perspective. The second approach is *critical*. It principally inherits from major figures of European philosophy, including Kant, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, who present metaphysics as having a negative side and a positive side. Accordingly, this type of approach towards metaphysics is, in reality, essentially meta-metaphysical. It concerns wondering about the conditions of possibility of metaphysical knowledge, about the illusion of the knowledge of the supersensible, about erring in the reduction of being to beings, and even about historical, ideological, and social determinations at work in metaphysical doctrines. Finally, the last approach is specifically *constructive*, in the sense that it intends to positively describe the underlying structure of reality by rejecting the aforementioned critiques of metaphysics. Frequently, these three approaches are difficult to clearly discern from each other, and not solely because of a misunderstanding on the part of the philosophers in question, but above all because of the contingent impossibility of excluding the history of metaphysics and its limits when doing metaphysics today.

We can also approach the problem of the cohesiveness of non-analytic metaphysics by enumerating a certain number of philosophical currents that reserve a special seat for first philosophy: for example, process philosophy, idealism, phenomenology and its numerous branches, as well as diverse “neo-” currents such as neo-Thomism, neo-Kantianism, neo-Platonism, neo-

Aristotelianism, etc.

Let us stop to consider for a moment the emblematic case of phenomenology. Two foundational texts from this tradition clearly maintain the narrowness of its relation to ontology. For instance, from this long passage from Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* §64:

We can now say likewise that, in *a priori* transcendental phenomenology, all *a priori* sciences without exception originate with an ultimate grounding, thanks to its correlational research, and that, taken with this origin, they belong *within an all-embracing a priori phenomenology itself*, as its systematically differentiated *branches*. This system of the all-embracing *a priori* is therefore to be designated also as the systematic *unfolding of the all-embracing a priori* innate in the essence of a transcendental subjectivity (and consequently in that of transcendental intersubjectivity) – or as the systematic unfolding of the *universal logos of all conceivable being*. In other words: as developed systematically and fully, transcendental phenomenology would be *ipso facto* the true and *genuine universal ontology* – not, however, just an empty formal universal ontology, but also one that comprised in itself all regional existential possibilities, and did so in respect of all the *correlations* pertaining to them. [...] Finally, lest any misunderstanding arise, I would point out that, as already stated, phenomenology indeed *excludes every naïve metaphysics* that operates with absurd things in themselves, but *does not exclude metaphysics as such*. It does no violence to the problem-motives that inwardly drive the old tradition into the wrong line of inquiry and the wrong method; and it by no means professes to stop short of the ‘supreme and ultimate’ questions.

A quite remarkable text, in which Husserl assigns the role of true ontology (as opposed to traditional ontology) to phenomenology; far from exceeding metaphysics, the phenomenological breakthrough fundamentally renews it, and again gives it a central role.⁹³ Let us also consider the close of the famous §7 from *Being and Time*:

Ontology and phenomenology are not two different disciplines which among others belong to philosophy. Both terms characterize philosophy itself, its object and procedure. Philosophy is universal phenomenological ontology, taking its departure from the hermeneutic of *Dasein*, which, as analytic of *existence*, has fastened the end of the guideline of all philosophical inquiry at the point from which it arises and to which it returns.

For Heidegger at the end of the 1920s, the ambiguous proximity between metaphysics and phenomenology takes the form of the existential analytic of *Dasein*. Just as for Husserl, metaphysics renewed by phenomenology aspires to a foundational and propaedeutic role that determines the development of every philosophy, and even of every science. Even today, a philosopher like Jean-Luc Marion attempts to reaffirm the identity of phenomenology with first philosophy, motivated by the ideal of a new *philosophia perennis*. The relationship between phenomenology and metaphysics, however, contains a paradox, as Jocelyn Benoist writes:

In a curious exchange of properties, sometimes [phenomenology] has been able to assume the appearance of condemned metaphysics, sometimes that of metaphysics sought after in the eyes of what we now learn to see as its twin sister: analytic philosophy.⁹⁴

The case of Heidegger, beyond his work's critical aspect that we have already examined, would nevertheless merit separate treatment. In the last analysis, it is for Heidegger, rather than for Husserl, that ontology takes a “subjectivist” turn, if we do not designate by this term “idealism” strictly speaking – since idealism is already and above all at the heart of the Husserlian transcendental turn. Ontology understood as hermeneutic of *Dasein* is subjectivist in the sense that it consecrates a “humanist” and idiosyncratic approach to existence that emphasizes certain extra-ontological aspects, according to classical criteria, of being-in-the-world – beginning with the

thematization of “care” (*Sorge*) and “anxiety” (*Angst*) at the heart of the question of being. Human being is again placed at the center of this reformed ontology, for, among beings, human being alone opens onto the question of being, i.e., of its being. Human being is the animal who asks itself why it is in the world, who questions its existence, and, so to speak, the incongruity of its pure presence. In addition, human being is the one who becomes frightened by its pure presence. It is therefore a meditation on *human being*, and not on God, the Big Bang, or the Prime Mover, which gives meaning to Leibniz’s question: “why is there something rather than nothing?” Therefore, ontology thus understood has little in common with the previous definitions that we have summarized.⁹⁵

Some non-analytic philosophers have also defended more traditional definitions of metaphysics. For example, the Latvian philosopher Nicolai Hartmann has developed a quite interesting stratified ontology of “levels of reality”. Predominant in his work is the inner conviction that it is impossible to reduce the entities of the world, and thus reflection on that which is, to a common denominator. Each level of reality – physico-mathematical, organic, psychic, and spiritual – is a different field of ontological investigation that delivers to us one aspect among others of the variegation of being.

After the glorious moments of philosophies of life, mind, or immanence, over the past twenty years we have witnessed in “continental” territory the renaissance of a non-phenomenological speculative and systematic metaphysics, seeking to take on a foundational role and rely on a quest for an irrefutable knowledge.⁹⁶ This type of metaphysical practice has diverse influences, but we can mention among its main characteristics a pronounced taste for demonstration, coinciding with the refusal of a “poetic” deviation from ontology, a reluctance to engage with the historicization of metaphysics, as well as a marked preference for the most original (and at times the most counter-intuitive) theses. We should add that this conception of metaphysics is often very ambitious, and aspires to be included in speculative philosophy’s lineage, by taking on the highest degree of abstraction while at the same time privileging a worldview of the primary features of reality over a detailed study, for example, of the types of entities that exist.

In the margins of idealism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and the new speculative metaphysics, can we delimit other non-analytic conceptions of metaphysics? We should here address the thorny and complicated question of “postmodernism”, and even of what certain magazines call “pop philosophy”. Without lingering too much on the debate concerning the lack of clarity of these names, let us remark that it seems difficult to find something like a definition or a postmodern practice of metaphysics, except to say that we no longer know what we truly mean by this term. For example, we frequently bring together the substantive “metaphysics” or the adjective “metaphysical” with studies having to do with psychoanalysis (above all Lacanian), politics, sociology, or anthropology. Moreover, postmodernism is often the new name for “deconstructionist” critiques of metaphysics. But how would we then qualify the position of a Slavoj Žižek *against* the postmodern critique of metaphysics?⁹⁷ On this subject, one might surmise that the taste for irony, subversion, and brilliant synthesis often prevails over the rigor of thought (at least metaphysical thought).

Before examining in greater detail the question of the renewal of metaphysics in the analytic tradition, let us again quote Claudine Tiercelin, who gives an account of the diversity of possible approaches towards metaphysics, which we have briefly examined:

Let us depart from the strong Avicennian and Scotist idea: the autonomy of metaphysics is guaranteed by the acknowledgment of the fact that being is the most known principle. But if it is, this is as its fundamental indetermination. Can we understand fully the irreducibility, or even the scientificity of metaphysics in terms of this indetermination? The entire difficulty of a well-conducted metaphysical project comes [...] from there: if we want to bring it to fruition, we

must get out of being in its indetermination and say something about being. How can we both avoid the unspeakable, the inexpressible without reducing being? [...] It is this challenge that Aristotle ceaselessly risked and which, in a word, he succeeded in clinging to. [...] But metaphysics has shown that we can retain some of Aristotle's lessons without becoming Aristotelian. [...] We can envisage a metaphysics that puts the most emphasis no longer on substance, but on relation, or on quality, or on event, or even on properties, states of things, abstract propositions, possible worlds [...], relations in intension, individual essences [...], and even situations.⁹⁸

3. The Ontological Turn

“However [much, during the period of logical positivism,] analytic philosophy [...] was an anti-metaphysical movement,” Putnam writes, “it has recently become the most pro-metaphysical movement on the world philosophical scene.”⁹⁹ This reversal is certainly spectacular. It can even seem unnatural when we ignore the details of the history of analytic philosophy (see section 4). Taking the retrospective opposing view to the famous “linguistic turn” whose label and accompanying prejudices still stick to the skin of analytic philosophers, John Heil and C. B. Martin published an article in 1999 entitled “The Ontological Turn”.¹⁰⁰ They take note of the incomparable renewal of realist ontology, and condemn under the name of “linguisticism” the polymorphous thesis according to which we can only access reality by means of language:

Linguisticism does not succeed in replacing or eliminating ontology, but only diverting attention and postponing the hard questions. The mistake is to imagine that it is philosophically innocent.¹⁰¹

Whether the most radical defenders of semantic analysis like it or not, ontology is not only possible, but also inevitable and necessary. Meyerson wrote that “man practices metaphysics just as he breathes”, for as M. Jourdain, we practice ontology without knowing it. But this does not mean that all ontological postulates have the same value, nor that philosophers are in a better position than dentists or stockbrokers to decide between these postulates. The omnipresence of ontology must not be postulated at the cost of a relativist devaluation of ontological truth. In *From an Ontological Point of View*,¹⁰² John Heil therefore emphasizes the fact that a good ontology requires *seriousness* – understanding the idea of “ontological seriousness” as both difficult to obtain and at the same time as a cardinal virtue of the metaphysician. We can summarize this necessity for seriousness in the following manner: first, it is necessary to constantly be careful not to arbitrarily postulate a type of relation or entity that we think we need or that we have intuitions about; then, it is necessary to permanently unravel the chain of implicit ontological implications of our reasoning, in any domain of philosophy, so as to verify its coherence and appropriateness; finally, it is necessary to abstain from explanations involving undefined ontological entities. Heil details the benefits of ontological seriousness for philosophy of mind, and the danger produced through negligence or indifference in this domain. In particular, he devotes himself to the example of the relation of supervenience in the functionalist theories of mind that postulate that mental qualities “supervene” on the physical (neuronal) substratum of individuals. This recourse to the relation of supervenience, as Heil shows, is ontologically imprecise. A property of higher level A supervenes on a lower property B, if A depends on B, and if A covaries with B. According to him, we can formulate the relation of supervenience in the following way: “if a thing x has A at the higher level α , then there exists a property B at the lower level β , and if x has B, then x necessarily has A”. But this statement could be true (1) if α is identical to β , (2) if α is entirely made of β , (3) if α is caused by β , (4) if α and β have a common cause. However, as Heil notes, none of these relations correspond to what we vaguely understand by “supervenience”.¹⁰³ This example clearly shows the importance of a

meticulous examination of ontological implications that are integrated into each domain of philosophy and often remain unnoticed.

The return to grace of metaphysics and ontology is more recently accompanied by a novel development in the reflection on meta-ontological and meta-metaphysical order. The appearance in 2009 of a collection soberly entitled *Metametaphysics*¹⁰⁴ attests to the vitality of this discussion. We have already evoked a certain number of questions of meta-metaphysical order: on what conditions is metaphysics possible? What is the nature of metaphysical knowledge? What are the respective objects of metaphysics and of ontology? What method to adopt in order to describe the world? Etc. Of course, this type of discussion also opens up metaphysics to critique, by raising the following question: are metaphysical debates vain or groundless? At least three types of deflationism still threaten metaphysics today, mostly in the analytic world:

- (1) Strong deflationism: metaphysical debates are empty and purely verbal.
- (2) Moderate deflationism: there are genuine metaphysical debates, but they can be resolved in a relatively trivial way through a consideration of conceptual or semantic facts.
- (3) Scepticism: metaphysical debates are legitimate, but it will never be possible to settle the argument with certainty, in favor of a particular point of view on each subject; in this sense metaphysics formulates questions and hypotheses, but produces no response.

Points of view (1) and (2) are inherited from the critiques that we have examined in section 1. Point of view (3), on the other hand, is unique in that it is maintained even by some metaphysicians. This point of view does not undermine their interest in their discipline, but renders obsolete a strong version of metaphysical progress analogous to scientific progress. These remarks raise crucial questions about the conditions of possibility for metaphysics and ontology. Christopher Peacocke has especially drawn attention to the necessity of responding to what he calls the “integration challenge”.¹⁰⁵ The integration challenge can be summarized in the following manner: “We have to reconcile a plausible account of what is involved in the truth of statements of a given kind with a credible account of how we can know those statements, when we do know them.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, metaphysical inquiry should be accompanied by an epistemological inquiry that justifies the form of knowledge of the former. It is necessary, in every domain of philosophy, to unify metaphysics with epistemology in order to give correct justifications for the truth of our knowledge.

The other consequence of the resurgence of metaphysics in an analytic framework is the multiplication of great “debates” and “themes” that have become in some way *standards* that every metaphysician must confront. A non-exhaustive list of such themes should include:

- The new problem of universals: Do universals exist? Do tropes (abstract particulars) exist?
- The ontology of properties: are properties qualitative (attributing a real property, e.g., redness) or dispositional (power to produce a certain effect, e.g., weakness) or both at the same time?
- Modality: do possible worlds really exist or are they simply modal tools for understanding counterfactual statements? Is essence distinct from necessity?
- Causality: does causation exist? Are there free actions?
- The problem of material composition: are there tables or only certain arrangements of elementary particles that form what we call tables?
- The problem of co-location: is the sculpture entirely identical to the block of bronze it is made of?
- Social ontology: what is the ontological status of conventional entities such as banks,

- families, states, etc.?
- The problems of time: do the past and the future exist? Do objects have temporal parts? Does our identity persist over time?
 - The problems of vagueness: are there vague objects in reality?
 - Mind: are mental states reducible to a physical substratum?

Within each of these debates and in many others still, analytic metaphysicians tend to systematically elaborate a taxonomy of all the positions judged if not possible, at least reasonable, by most often labeling them, if you will, by “-ism” neologisms. This method has the advantage of establishing a kind of cartography of the primary metaphysical positions concerning the primary problems, and of allowing each of the interlocutors to locate the point of view of the other in the correct dialectical space. Accordingly, the discussions do not take the form of *ad hominem* attacks, but rather are consistent with the more general framework of the struggle between several antagonistic theories on the same question – according to the model of the natural sciences. However, this way of proceeding does not come without its disadvantages: to be original at all costs, some philosophers write articles maintaining the most improbable combinations of positions (often, too, with great technical ability).¹⁰⁷ One can see here one of the current vices of the law of “publish or perish”, which tends to impose itself throughout the world, but also the counterpart to the taxonomical obsession of analytic metaphysics that seems to favor the development of a “multiple-choice” ontology. Ontology can then take on an alluring arrangement on the basis of established taxonomy, and provide material for articles of the type: “can we maintain a position *x* about a problem A and a position *y* about a problem B?” Nevertheless, for the most part analytic metaphysicians grant major importance to the coherence of their commitments.

4. Subsidiary Remarks on the “Great Schism”¹⁰⁸

In the preceding sections, we’ve briefly mentioned the divide of contemporary philosophy between “analytics” and “continentals”. It is time to make a further detour along this fault line and explore its historical relevance. Let us first note that the common use of the antagonistic expressions “continental philosophy” and “analytic philosophy” is a recent development. In fact, it emerges at the end of the 1950s, in particular at the 1958 C erisy-la-Salle conference that enabled the meeting in France between distinguished philosophers coming from the two traditions: Ryle, Strawson, Quine, and Austin, on the one side, and Alqui e, Merleau-Ponty, Wahl, and Van Breda, on the other. In his opening address, Jean Wahl differentiates three prevailing currents in the world of philosophy: dialectical materialism (Marxism), analytic philosophy (according to him, coinciding with “neo-positivism and logical positivism”), and continental philosophy (“in diverse forms”, including phenomenology and existentialism). This colloquium, whose lectures *and* discussions were transcribed and published in 1962, is fascinating in many respects.¹⁰⁹ The participants each made the effort to understand the point of view of the other, and even to minimize the difference. Jean Wahl seemed convinced of this unrecognized affinity:

There are problems...philosophical problems...I believe real problems. But in fact we are much closer than many of us here think.

As for the “analytics”, they object to the prejudices of the linguistic turn: Austin goes so far as to say that “the expression does not represent much in my eyes”, but “as much this slogan as another”. However, the event is especially interesting because each discussion reveals that in fact the encounter is *missed*. When Merleau-Ponty, with a lot of good will, asks whether Ryle’s project is not much closer to phenomenology than he wants to admit, the Oxford philosopher responds in the

negative. But it is above all the genuine dialogue of the deaf between Father Van Breda (founder of the Husserl archives in Leuven) and P. F. Strawson that draws our attention. Each of them sketches out their own point of view and does not succeed in grasping the perspective of the other, despite Jean Wahl's several and somewhat desperate attempts to suggest again that "perhaps the agreement is deeper than it appears at first sight"! It is certainly true that the discussion then gets out of hand between the analytics themselves (Strawson, Ayer, and Ryle). Nevertheless, the C erisy-la-Salle conference, despite its objective of opening discussion, determined for a long time the terms of the divide between "analytics" and "continentals".

Let us return for a moment to the history of the schism. Numerous studies on the preliminary symptoms of analytic philosophy have shown, over the past few years, what is unnatural about the schism. It's not that the current state of the analytic-continental divide corresponds to real differences, but that these differences are not for the most part directly tributaries of the source of the analytic current. If we must seek the true origin of the radical divergence between two conceptions of philosophy – the one in love with systems, absolutes, and a historico-political or humanist view of knowledge, the other preferring logical analysis, argumentative clarity, and metaphysical realism – we should turn towards the German-Austrian border, and not the English Channel or the Atlantic. The radical critique of Kantianism by the Austrian philosopher Bernard Bolzano is in fact the point of departure of a profound rupture between, on the one side, the specifically German philosophy embodied by Fichte, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Adorno, etc., and, on the other side, the Austrian tradition founded by Bolzano, and continued essentially by Franz Brentano and his students – Meinong, Husserl, Ehrenfels, Marty, Twardowski – and beyond by their own students. For instance, Michael Dummett's seminal work¹¹⁰ has shown that the habit of considering analytic philosophy as a whole as "Anglo-American" was born from a "serious historical distortion". Rather, if we take into consideration the context of the development of analytic philosophy, we will be persuaded to call it "Anglo-Austrian". This acknowledgment of the Austrian way and Brentano's influence also shows that to systematically oppose phenomenology and analytic ontology (or ontology *tout court*) amounts, as we have seen, to arbitrarily ignoring Husserl's work undertaken before the turn of transcendental idealism (specifically in the *Logical Investigations*), but also the work of *realist* phenomenologists who claimed to follow his teaching, such as Johannes Daubert,¹¹¹ Adolf Reinach,¹¹² Max Scheler, and above all Roman Ingarden,¹¹³ whose contributions to contemporary metaphysics are major, and whose works are almost exclusively discussed by analytic philosophers. As Kevin Mulligan writes:

One of the numerous ironies of the history of philosophy of the century is that ontology flourished at its beginning, outside of the newborn analytic philosophy, in the philosophies of Brentano, Husserl, Reinach, and Meinong.¹¹⁴

In addition to the phenomenologists (and Meinong, who we will study more fully in the following section), we find among Brentano's students the Polish philosopher Kazimierz Twardowski who founded the very prolific Lw ow-Warsaw school, initiating what is commonly called "the golden age" of Polish philosophy. This school was closely associated with pioneering studies on non-standard logic and a genuine metaphysical orientation, thanks to figures such as  ukasiewicz, Le niewski, Kotarbiński, Ajdukiewicz, and Tarski. In Austria itself, the Graz school continued Brentano's teachings in several directions, by developing in particular a new psychology spurred by Christian von Ehrenfels, founder of *Gestalttheorie*, and the theory of the object with – in addition to Meinong himself – Stephan Witasek and Vittorio Benussi. Among Brentano's other important disciples, we can mention Anton Marty, whose work concerns psychology as well as ontology, and Carl Stumpf, the dedicatee of the *Logical Investigations*.

All of these philosophers demonstrated that the demand for clarity, rigor, and technical

competence (especially the mastery of formal languages), along with attention to the methods and development of the natural sciences, and a realist conception of truth as well as a clear taste for argumentative discussion (which goes hand in hand with the acceptance of a certain “anonymity” of philosophy), involve neither sterile reductionism nor archaic naïveté,¹¹⁵ and are in no way incompatible with a keen interest in “human” approaches – or, in short, intentional approaches – towards the metaphysics that we find in psychology, phenomenology, or even in diverse forms of idealism. Let us consider Tadeusz Kotarbiński’s almost heroic definition of the philosopher:

A philosopher is a thinker who strives for precision in formulating problems, defining concepts, formulating theorems and systems of theorems. He does so principally by his inner effort intended to ensure a better understanding of thoughts of people groping in the dark, to formulate problems in a more rational way, to achieve complete clarity of concepts, usually obscure, and to obtain self-evident theorems and sound systems. He struggles against vagueness, obscurity, indefiniteness, and confusion of thought, and combats forms of inebriated thinking which is often a result of succumbing to stubborn superstition, to sentimental illusion, or to partiality due to the personal or social position of the thinker.¹¹⁶

After these brief remarks, it should be clear that the analytic current has never had a monopoly on rigorous methodology inspired by the natural sciences, nor, of course, a monopoly on metaphysical investigation. Why, then, does its supposedly positivist and scientific orientation result in anti-metaphysical conclusions? We have already suggested that these allegations rest essentially on the memory of the Vienna Circle episode. The analytic current was born from Russell and Moore’s “rebellion” against neo-Hegelian idealism of the British philosopher Francis Herbert Bradley, and against the influence of idealism in general in England during this time (also embodied by McTaggart and Bosanquet). Russell in particular attempted to rehabilitate the notion of “analysis” after its critique in the context of Bradley’s monism, who, in *Appearance and Reality*, extolled the metaphysical knowledge of the world “as a *whole*”. But the defense of analysis aims precisely to reevaluate the possibility of a realist and rational metaphysics that does not sacrifice intuition, argumentation, and empirical inquiry on the altar of the spirit of systems. In this way, analytic philosophy has never been anti-metaphysical *in reality*, and above all not at its origin. Again, as Kevin Mulligan writes:

The Fregean distinctions between the three domains of physical, psychological, and ideal entities, and between saturated and unsaturated entities, the Russellian, Moorean, and Ramseyan metaphysics of universals, relations, and values give evidence of this. Even an enemy of “metaphysics” such as Carnap is the philosopher of a construction of the world that is inserted into a long tradition of attempts stemming from Whitehead, Russell, and Nicod up to Goodman.¹¹⁷

Therefore, it would not be incorrect to claim that analytic philosophy has been the most metaphysical current of the twentieth century. It is moreover this current which has truly inherited from the metaphysical ambitions of the early days of phenomenology and the theory of the object, thanks to philosophers such as C. J. Ducasse and Roderick Chisholm who continued the Austrian tradition in the United States. The history of the analytic-continental “schism” is therefore not so much one of a continuous debate between two theoretical “blocks”, but more the evolution of perpetually sliding tectonic plates whose zones of contact are not always very clear, but which can form, in little time, chasms and peaks. On the terrain of metaphysics, perhaps the most sensitive to these seismic variations, the deepest divide is one of a methodological order inherited from the German-Austrian fracture which peaked in Bolzano’s time. But on the doctrinal plane, the most original works, which we will now examine, are situated at the border.

5. *Mainstream Metaphysics and Borderline Metaphysics*

The term “*mainstream metaphysics*” was proposed by David Manley in 2009 in order to characterize the prevailing realist current in analytic metaphysics, as opposed to the various forms of deflationism that maintain either that metaphysical debates are empty (that is to say, purely verbal), or that they are trivial. This typology nevertheless excludes philosophers who do not subscribe to this *mainstream* realist conception while claiming to do metaphysics.¹¹⁸ Symmetrically, we can group together these authors under the heterogeneous category of *borderline metaphysics*. Two major antagonistic tendencies seem to occupy the terrain of these marginal positions:

- (1) “Unrestrained realism”,¹¹⁹ or ontological inflationism. We understand by this expression the extension of realism to domains or entities which are not normally taken seriously.
- (2) Idealism, or its panpsychist and solipsist variants.

The two most influential positions of the first tendency are undoubtedly Meinongianism and modal realism. The Austrian Alexius Meinong, in his *Theory of the Object* (1904),¹²⁰ offers an exceeding of ontology in his own way, not in order to proclaim the end of metaphysics, but instead to widen its field of study. How can we broaden the scope of a discipline that already studies being in the most general way? Meinong’s response is simple: ontology considers existent entities; the theory of the object, understood in this way, studies the *pure* object – without caring to know whether it exists or not. In other words, Meinong extends the domain of investigation of metaphysics, at its highest level of abstraction, to non-existent objects, that is to say, to merely possible objects and even to contradictory and therefore impossible objects. If we consider that ontology studies what is, it is no longer possible to identify it with the theory of the object. Jean-François Courtine instead suggests employing the neologism “tinology”, formed from the particle *ti* that in Greek refers to the undetermined “something”. Resorting to the Greek is desirable, because, as Courtine and Libera have shown in several studies, the theory of the object is not as radically new as Meinong suggests. The origins of “tinology” can even be traced to Plato’s *Sophist*. The stranger asks (237a) if we can refer to a non-being (*mè on*), or more precisely what this expression “non-being” refers to. Theaetetus responds that it is perhaps quite simply to the “*ti*”, that is to say, that the expression “*mè on*” refers to the *something* in general (and not to a being, *to on*). But the stranger immediately rejects this more audacious than naïve hypothesis, by declaring that the “*ti*” always refers to being, since it is not possible to employ it “as naked, deprived of everything that has being”. Plato opened the path of tinology more than two millennia before Meinong, though he refused to follow it. But the genealogy of this strange discipline did not end with the author of the *Sophist*: after him, Porphyry in Late Antiquity and above all Avicenna in the Middle Ages continued analyses in this direction. But it is undoubtedly, even later, the Brentanian reading of Aristotle that allowed Meinong to explicitly conceive his new theory of the object. If this theory was not unprecedented, it was no longer without posterity. Today, a small “neo-Meinongian” current exists that is devoted to exploiting the power of the tinological scheme while attempting to escape from its weaknesses, especially with the help of advances in logic – for example, among these heirs, Edward N. Zalta, Terence Parsons, and Richard Sylvan (*alias* Richard Routley).

Another marginal but nevertheless extremely influential metaphysical thesis, modal realism, extolled by the great metaphysician David Lewis, has nourished a voluminous literature. The point of departure of this theory is the contemporary analysis of modality, that is to say, of possibility and necessity, that found a novel formulation with the development of modal logic (by C. I. Lewis in particular). Saul Kripke’s semantics of possible worlds, introduced in the 1950s, interprets modality in terms of quantification over possible worlds: “x is necessary” becomes “x is true in all possible worlds”, and “y is possible” becomes “y is true in at least one possible world”. This semantic

interpretation allows the clarification of the majority of our vague intuitions concerning modality, but the reference to possible worlds remains a mere conceptual tool. David Lewis, on the other hand, in his remarkable work from 1986, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, takes possible worlds “seriously”, by betting on their real existence.¹²¹ This is why his position was given the name “modal realism”: Lewis maintained a form of extremely inflationist realism concerning modality; each way that a world *could* be is a way that some world really *is*. To say that bodies are necessarily extended is to say that it is *really* true in all the worlds that bodies are extended. Nevertheless, Lewis rejects several possibilities: only a single actual world exists, and, also, transworld individuals do not exist. Lewis justifies the hypothesis of the existence of possible worlds based on its considerable theoretical benefits, but the theory remains difficult to accept for the majority of metaphysicians. The posterity of modal realism is paradoxical in this regard: almost no philosopher adopts it,¹²² but many take the pains of discussing it.

The recent developments of idealism are more marginal, but nevertheless extremely interesting. We have already emphasized that today’s anti-realists identify the refusal of realism with a refusal of metaphysics *simpliciter*, as if the *mainstream* position applied to the entirety of the discipline. As a result, the prevailing impression among analytics sometimes seems to boil down to a makeshift alternative: either we are realists, or we are fierce adversaries of metaphysics. Yet as John Heil notes, Berkeley’s immaterialism, for example, is not a refusal or a limitation of metaphysics, but constitutes in itself an eminently metaphysical theory that the Irish philosopher accepts as such. In fact, from the beginning of the twentieth century up to today, it is certainly on the English side that we find the most consistent forms of contemporary idealism. Russell and Moore struggled with much relentlessness against the heroes of this current: T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, and J. M. E. McTaggart. All these philosophers were heavily influenced by an absolute idealism of the neo-Hegelian type. The most recent representatives of British idealism differ considerably from this initial orientation. For instance, John Foster defends a veritable subjective (or “phenomenalist”) idealism of the Berkeleyian type,¹²³ while Timothy Sprigge develops a panpsychist version of absolute idealism.¹²⁴ In addition, Caspar Hare’s original position in favor of an “egocentric presentism” proves to be neither more nor less than a contemporary version of moderate solipsism.¹²⁵

These few examples should suffice to show that so-called continental philosophy does not have a monopoly on originality, or even on extravagance. Before discussing further the question of ontological parsimony in section 7 and the problem of chimeric speculation in section 8, we will attempt to evaluate the wealth of new formal tools designed to guarantee standard criteria of rigor and consistency for metaphysics.

6. “Expanding the toolbox”¹²⁶

The metaphysician’s toolbox has certainly grown since Aristotle and the preliminary symptoms of syllogism. It is common to accuse the practice of analytic philosophy of giving excessive attention to formal logic, but this applies mostly to groups that privilege semantic analysis. Yet analytic metaphysics is now in touch with the things themselves, rallying *a posteriori* the slogan of the early Husserl: “*zu den Sachen selbst!*” But contrary to what the early analytic philosophers were capable of thinking, and to what a number of metaphysicians still think, logic is perhaps not the best tool to study the furniture of the world. For instance, in a play on words, Barry Smith objects to ontology being little by little replaced by a “F(*a*)ntology”, that is to say, by a puppet ontology privileging syntactic characteristics of first-order logic (predicate calculus) as conceived by Frege and Russell.¹²⁷ According to F(*a*)ntology, the ontological structure of reality is captured syntactically by a formalism of the “F(*a*)” type, where “F” represents what is general in

reality, and “*a*” what is individual (for example, “the rose is red” can be analyzed in $F(a)$, where F represents the property of being red and a represents the rose). But Smith considers “ $F(a)$ ontology” as a logicist relic of Kantianism, where attention to the structure of language takes precedence over attention to the structure of the world itself.

The critique of the systematic recourse to first-order logic does not aim to deprive metaphysics of every formal tool, but instead to give it more appropriate methods. Taking up the torch of the Husserlian project of the *Logical Investigations*, numerous preeminent philosophers, including Barry Smith himself, wore themselves out for thirty-odd years developing a true “formal ontology”. The definition that Kevin Mulligan gives is clear:

Formal ontology is to ontology and metaphysics what logic and formal semantics are to the theory of signification.¹²⁸

Let us note that there is a “strong tendency” and a “weak tendency” in formal ontology. In its weak version, formal ontology is a mere conceptual tool intended to clarify and refine our intuitions in order to guide the development and progress of metaphysics. But the strong version sees formal ontology from the perspective of a veritable axiomatization of ontology, analogous to the formalization of the foundations of mathematics. However, this perspective is not as novel as it may appear. For instance, Nino Cocchiarella employs an explicitly Leibnizian vocabulary to describe formal ontology:

The goal of a formal ontology is the construction of a *lingua philosophica*, or *characteristica universalis*, as explicated in terms of an *ars combinatoria* and of a *calculus ratiocinator*, as part of a formal theory of predication. A formal ontology should serve as the framework of a *characteristica realis*, and hence as the basis of a formal approach to science and cosmology. It should also serve as a framework for our commonsense understanding of the world.¹²⁹

This definition seems as ambitious as it is enigmatic for the novice, so we will attempt to distinguish the primary contemporary orientations of formal ontology. One of the heavily explored ways to attempt to endow metaphysics with a sufficiently vast formal base is by referring to the theory of sets, which is known to be crucially important in studies on the foundations of mathematics. One should be suspicious of the ontological use of the theory of sets, although the German philosopher Uwe Meixner, for example, was able to formulate an axiomatic set-theoretical version of formal ontology in his *Axiomatic Formal Ontology*.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, some metaphysicians agree that the theory of sets is not an appropriate tool for formal ontology, for different reasons. Let us mention in particular that:

- (1) The theory of sets operates at the level of abstract mathematical entities and is not as appropriate for dealing with material *or* immaterial ordinary entities. Thus, the concepts of “limit” and “continuum”, for example, essential for the formalization of ontology, are not fully captured in a formalization of the set-theoretical framework.
- (2) The application of the theory of sets to an ordinary domain presupposes the existence of an elementary level of irreducible entities (*Urelemente*) so as to make possible the reconstitution of upper-level structures from the lower level through more and more far-reaching sets. In the concrete world, on the other hand, we have no need to isolate a basic element as the point of departure for ontological construction.
- (3) Sets are abstract entities defined entirely by the specification of their members. It is therefore difficult to give an account of the change and transformation through time of concrete objects that can lose or gain parts.

Instead of the theory of sets, two types of formal theories are therefore privileged in ontology: mereology and topology. Mereology is an axiomatic formal system that treats relations between parts and wholes.¹³¹ Following especially Whitehead and Husserl's contributions,¹³² mereology's early systematic developments emerged in the work of the Polish philosopher Stanisław Leśniewski (one of the distinguished members of the Lvów-Warsaw school), and then, in the name of a "calculus of individuals", in the work of Henry Leonard and Nelson Goodman. More recently, in *Parts of Classes*, David Lewis experimented with an original approach, working to combine mereology and the theory of sets. Mereology does not employ the term "set", but rather the term "sum"; it formally describes the relations that exist between a part and the whole of which it is a part, and how several entities can be mereologically "joined" in order to form a sum (that is to say a whole made up of these entities as parts). Accordingly, mereology lets us speak formally about ordinary entities, and thus can be applied to immaterial entities as well as to material entities that we experience every day. As for topology, it lets us formalize our intuitions about spatial relations between different entities, and about the notion of "limit" (how can a nothing separate something?) Note that the response of theoretical physics is not generalizable to formal ontology. For example, topology focuses on determining what we mean when we say that x is analogous to y . While that seems clear enough in the case of concrete objects (x is in contact with y), topology can also study abstract entities. For instance, in *Conceptual Spaces*, the Swedish cognitive scientist Peter Gärdenfors recently advanced a true theory of *distances* in a conceptual space.¹³³ Even more recently, Barry Smith and other metaphysicians have attempted to combine mereology and topology by creating "mereotopology", a formal theory of wholes, limits, parts, and spatial locations.¹³⁴

Nevertheless, mereology and topology are not the only fields of investigation of formal ontology. Especially in formal ontology, we find very complex work on the formalization of relations of existential dependence – for example, in Fabrice Correia's edited monograph of his doctoral thesis, *Existential Dependence and Cognate Notions*.¹³⁵ This meticulous analysis continues Kit Fine's work on the concepts of foundation and ontological dependence. Over the past few years, other studies of formal ontology have also paid attention to non-paradigmatic ontological entities: surfaces, holes, shadows, vague objects, knots, etc.,¹³⁶ or to the problematic status of events.

Thus, formal ontology has had a prosperous development since Barry Smith's programmatic articles from the end of the 1970s. The weird thing about this branch of metaphysics is that it must maintain a sort of *époque* for the types of entities that really exist, which is why, in the last analysis, it coincides quite well with the definition of ontology expressed above in (2a) in section 2. In a sense, this entails a formal analysis of *quodditas* without regard for *quidditas*. The question of knowing whether universals or even material objects exist or not matters little and must not influence its inquiry. Formal ontology reveals the formal structure from *every possible world*, but that does not mean that it has no effect on metaphysics, in the sense of (2b), as the determination of what *really* exists in our world – quite to the contrary. In fact, the recent experiments in applied ontology (section 8) are essentially founded on formal ontology. However, if we now come to the question *quid?* (what exactly exists in our world, what types of entities give it its furniture?), we must first examine a serious methodological problem, historically called "Ockham's razor".

7. The Principle of Economy, or Ockham's Imbroglia

It is not necessary to reexamine in detail the history of Ockham's razor in order to understand its importance in contemporary metaphysical debates. Let us only remember that this methodological principle first appeared in the context of the medieval problem of universals, and that William of Ockham was a vehement defender of nominalism. Nowhere in his works do we find any explicit formulation of the principle that takes his name, but the statements which come the closest to it are the following: "*Numquam ponenda est pluralitas sine necessitate*" (plurality must

not be postulated without necessity) and “*Frustra fit per plura quod potest fieri per pauciora*” (it is in vain that we make with several what we can make with a small number).¹³⁷ For Ockham, this concerns defending the nominalist thesis, judged more parsimoniously than the realism of universals. In addition, let us note that this type of principle of economy was already formulated in Aristotle, and that we owe to Condillac the expression “razor of the Nominalists”, which was transformed into “Ockham’s razor”.

The advantage of a principle of economy in metaphysics is challenged by definitions of ontology that, as we have seen, assign to it the task of establishing the inventory of types of existent entities. For example, in the following statement:

(1) “Peter is bigger than Paul.”

Does this mean that Peter possesses the property “being bigger than Paul”? Let us consider a second statement:

(2) “Peter is 5’11” and Paul is 5’9”.”

Must the fact expressed by statement (1) *be added to* the fact expressed by statement (2) about the respective sizes of Peter and Paul? In other words, can we reduce (1) to (2), or instead is it necessary to admit that (1) expresses *something more* than (2) about the ontological furniture of the world? We could easily give more examples of this type. These kinds of problems contribute to contemporary formulations of Ockham’s razor, such as the one given by Claudine Tiercelin:

To take metaphysics seriously is to begin by accepting the idea that it is necessary to aim at a comprehension of reality in terms of the most limited possible number of ingredients, while also ensuring that we omit none of them. To differentiate, to be exhaustive. That obliges us to correctly situate, to reduce, and, in certain cases, to eliminate certain features of the world. In this regard, the metaphysician is similar to the physician whose methodology does not let a thousand flowers blossom, but follows the most hypocaloric diet possible.¹³⁸

As such, this principle seems to come from pure common sense. It echos the views of many other contemporary metaphysicians. For example, David Armstrong goes on and on about the necessity of a “cost-benefit” analysis of metaphysical theses, and concludes: “*Other things being equal, I shall account the more economical theory the better theory*”.¹³⁹ Also borrowing from the vocabulary of the economy, David Lewis compares the “theoretical benefit” of modal realism with its “ontological cost”, in order to ask if the hypothesis is the “cheapest”.¹⁴⁰

However, we can question the validity of this meta-theoretical obsession that seems to ultimately boil down to a report of the philosopher-consumer on the quality/price relation of a hypothesis (in a hyper-competitive market). Elevated to the place of the fetish object of analytic metaphysics, “Ockham’s razor” could well have been the victim of its own celebrity – everyone knows that a too-sharp blade presents some danger, at least if we use it carelessly. In 1978, Barry Smith warned metaphysicians against the pernicious effects of “Ockhamist reductionism”. In fact, Smith writes that the classical principle of economy – “thou shalt not multiply entities without necessity” – has been occasionally perverted into a vow of poverty: “thou shalt deny entities wherever possible, that is to say, wherever compatible with one’s particular short-term philosophical purposes”.¹⁴¹ This perversion historically results from the struggle against ontological inflationism exemplified by the “Meinongian jungle”. Throughout the twentieth century and up to the present, metaphysics has been quartered between Ockhamist reductionism and this type of ontological inflationism. Kevin Mulligan underlines “a dialectic that is characteristic of the debates in analytic metaphysics and ontology – the alternation [...] between generous and frugal ontologies”.¹⁴²

Rather than speak about the diachronic alternation between these two tendencies, we could instead speak about the competitive coexistence, within each important metaphysical debate, between what Karen Bennett calls a “high ontology side” and a “low ontology side”.¹⁴³ For example, in the problem of material composition, the low ontology side is occupied by “compositional nihilists”, who deny the existence of composites such as the table, while the high ontology side is occupied by the sworn defenders of composition. Of course, this schematic bipartition could itself be refined on the same principle: among the defenders of material composition, we should distinguish the “moderates” (e.g., tables exist, but this group of tables has no distinct existence from the tables of which it is composed, as group-of-tables) and the zealots of unrestrained mereological composition (if a space contains an object *a* and a second object *b*, there exist not two but three entities in this space: *a*, *b*, and the mereological sum composed of *a* and *b*). As Mulligan and Bennett emphasize, whether they are either economic or general, the defenders of the different positions generally try to minimize the differences that separate them in order to avoid the double-edged Ockhamist blade (the accusation, either, of not postulating enough entities, or, of postulating too many of them – no doubt more typical).¹⁴⁴ For the high ontologists, this strategy is to show that their commitments are “ontologically innocent” (Bennett 2009), and, for their opponents, to make declarations of the type: “my list of categories is much shorter than yours [...] but I can make with my short list everything that you can make with yours” (Mulligan 2000).

Nevertheless, the debates about the most adequate formulation of Ockham’s razor can be simplified by the distinction that Achille C. Varzi makes between ontological *exuberance* and *extravagance*:¹⁴⁵ exuberance is the unreasonable inflation of the number of entities accepted by an ontological theory, while extravagance is the acceptance of counter-intuitive and problematic entities, even in small numbers. This difference is especially apparent in discussions about the restriction of mereological composition. But, as Varzi notes, suspicions of exuberance and extravagance are sometimes both founded on a false impression. It is therefore more fruitful to be prudent and rigorous in evaluating the ontological “cost” of a theory in order to make appropriate use of Ockham’s razor. In other words, the role of intuition must not be decisive in a good conception of ontological parsimony. In the end the principle of economy in its moderate form would not be isolated as a useless criteria, and it is not so ridiculous that it would appear to claim, according to Quine’s witticism, “to shave off Plato’s beard with Ockham’s razor”.

Therefore, discussions of the most judicious formulation of the “principle of economy” have a special place in contemporary meta-ontological debates. But this type of methodological principle is not enough to guarantee that metaphysicians will be realists.

8. A Crack in the Ivory Tower

In an article about the problematic situation of contemporary philosophy, Kevin Mulligan, Peter Simons, and Barry Smith harshly criticize the *horror mundi* of analytic metaphysicians, drunk from insoluble paradoxes and trifling controversies.¹⁴⁶ This critique aims in particular at (1) the hyper-specialized debates which have almost no effect on ontology in general and even less on “practice”, and (2) the positions which, even within important and legitimate debates, defend not only counter-intuitive theses (to the point where it is difficult to sincerely believe them to be true), but that are, also, difficult to “concretely” represent.¹⁴⁷ The first critique can be aimed especially at certain pointless debates about apparent paradoxes, and more generally at all the publications that use a very technical approach to relatively trivial or less important problems – the “nitpicky” type. The second critique aims, for example, at presentism (the thesis according to which only the present exists) which is on certain points as difficult to maintain as solipsism, and, a theory that is very difficult to intuitively imagine, four-dimensionalism (the thesis according to which objects exist in

four dimensions and have temporal parts). Modal realism, which has given rise to a voluminous literature since 1986, also falls within the scope of these accusations: it is difficult to sincerely believe that an infinity of worlds really exists when we have no means of empirically verifying this apparently extravagant thesis.

Whatever we think about these remarks, they remind us that the fact that non-philosophers associate the term “metaphysics” with chimerical and irrealist speculations has its basis in the metaphysicians themselves, and that these metaphysicians must be careful not to isolate themselves in the stellar landscape of the questions they are specialists in.¹⁴⁸ However, far from renewing the common attacks against armchair speculative metaphysics, Mulligan, Simons, and Smith offer to their peers some organized excursions to vibrant countries of the modern world. This philosophical ride has a name: applied ontology. The very name of this newborn sub-discipline is surprising: by definition, ontology is a theoretical inquiry that has no practical consequences. However, the term “ontology” began to be used about fifteen years ago by computer scientists, a fact that has for a long time escaped philosophers. In computer science, it designates a formal language (a software artifact) designed to serve as a framework for a certain set of operations. In particular, the development of a computational ontology responds to the problem of the “tower of Babel”: how are we able to make common two databases if they do not have the same “vocabulary”, and, more precisely, the same taxonomy for classifying the data that they safeguard? The role of ontology in the information sciences is to establish an appropriate “universal” framework in order to render the databases compatible, for, as in philosophy, the “ontological” commitments of such databases are not necessarily apparent, and far from being optimized. Applied ontology continues this type of work in areas such as engineering, biomedicine, and even geography. In each case, it is about hierarchizing entities in a rigorous and appropriate manner that serves the discipline, particularly influencing how software organizes data and manages specific operations. In medicine, this concretely facilitates the classification of computer systems and therefore all of medical knowledge. In geography, using ontology clarifies the nature of certain spontaneously utilized entities, posing questions such as: do geographic entities like mountains exist? What is the relation between a geographic entity and a physical territory? Can a geographic entity subsist without territory or definite limits? Are there clear criteria for defining geographic entities? Etc.¹⁴⁹ Applied ontology is also actively used in the field of social ontology, which has evolved significantly over the past few years, following John Searle’s pioneering studies.¹⁵⁰ As Peter Simons emphasizes, only time will tell if applied ontology can make a name for itself as a useful and functional discipline. We can also give a more contemporary and less concrete meaning to the notion of application in metaphysics by following John Heil’s conception of ontology examined above. It is possible to “apply” the results of a general ontology to particular disciplines, as philosophy of mind applies to the cognitive sciences. This allows us to measure the “practical” benefits of metaphysics.

Another way of tackling the question of the relation between theoretical metaphysics and the everyday world is through empirical experimentation. At least two types of practices can guarantee metaphysics a relation to experience, if mediated by intuition. The first is the thought experiment, which has been often shown to have a heuristic role in philosophical investigation in general and metaphysics in particular. Thought experiments let us put our spontaneous and impulsive intuitions on this or that subject to the test, and rectify certain inadequate ontological postulates as a result. The second type of relation to experience is found in the more restrained development of experimental metaphysics by testing our ontological intuitions on the largest possible number of individuals, not in order to correct them, but to evaluate them. Certainly, nothing indicates to us that our spontaneous conceptions are right, but this can still serve to guide theoretical research or to raise new questions. The problem of the relation of metaphysics to common sense is ancient. Moore made good use of the latter in order to “refute” idealism. We have already emphasized that the formalization of ontology is not a merciless crusade against intuition, but instead a continuation and

correction. However, picking up the thread of a tendency running through the entire history of philosophy, certain studies¹⁵¹ have updated the possibility of a “naïve ontology” as opposed to scholarly ontology, by analogy with “naïve physics”. Completely against the idea that “metaphysics is almost by definition contrary to common sense”,¹⁵² naïve ontology’s attention is directed at mesoscopic reality, by not seeking to correct how we naturally perceive it.

After a forced march through some of the principal aspects of contemporary metaphysics and ontology, we can close by briefly discussing two more circumstantial aspects of the question: the situation of metaphysics in France and the uncertain future of the discipline considered from the perspective of the analytic-continental schism.

9. *Metaphysics à la française*

The place of metaphysics in France is somewhat paradoxical. While French philosophers have been counted among the greatest metaphysicians over the past seven centuries, especially in the Middle Ages and in modern times, it is no longer in the field of philosophy called “French” where metaphysics is the most lively today. The very future of French phenomenology, divided since Merleau-Ponty’s death between a Heideggerian hermeneutic tradition (Derrida, Janicaud, Courtine) and a rather Husserlian “orthodox” tradition (Henry, Marion, Barbaras), is uncertain, to say the least, and is hardly in a position to be the engine of the contemporary renewal of metaphysics. Certainly, the salutary works of Jean-François Lavigne, Patricia Limido-Heulot, or Wioletta Miskiewicz have demonstrated that the works of realist phenomenologists, from Daubert to Ingarden, have generated a historical interest in France, but these studies do not directly aim to further the future of ontology. As Jean-François Courtine recently wrote:

If phenomenology, or better, its “idea”, even its critical idea, must struggle, it is in fact certainly against itself. I mean against its full-scale development and the effects that it induces by labeling and contrastive identification: phenomenology *versus* analytic philosophy.¹⁵³

However, there are non-analytic French philosophers who fully accept the task of doing metaphysics. In addition to Alain Badiou’s work, the ambitious program of Quentin Meillassoux’s “speculative materialism” opens up vast horizons and arouses a growing interest, which is even more significant given that its most substantial developments remain to come in the monumental work *L’inexistence divine*.

“French” analytic metaphysics, or rather analytic metaphysics of French origin, since it would be frivolous to reduce an international current to a particular language or country, rapidly developed after difficult beginnings. We must praise Frédéric Nef’s accomplished work, as well as Jean-Maurice Monnoyer and Roger Pouivet in particular, for disseminating the texts, debates and history of this tradition. Claudine Tiercelin’s nomination to the Collège de France represents a double victory, because she engages with the analytic current while maintaining strong ties to the history of philosophy and the French rationalist tradition, and, also, because it is the first time in the history of this illustrious institution that a chair of metaphysics (and more precisely of “metaphysics and philosophy of knowledge”) was created. This so-called “unknown of the Collège de France”¹⁵⁴ has done important work on Peirce, Putnam and pragmatism that requires metaphysics to keep its feet on the ground, and, in *Le ciment des choses*,¹⁵⁵ does not hesitate to introduce the project of a realist scientific metaphysics, based on sound epistemological considerations inspired by the most important work on the subject.

However, questioning the contemporary status of metaphysics in France must not prevent us from (re)discovering the rich and sometimes forgotten lineage of French metaphysicians of the

twentieth century that belong to movements as diverse as spiritualism, personalism, neo-Thomism, neo-Platonism, existentialism, etc. Let us mention among them: Jeah Wahl (*Traité de métaphysique, L'expérience métaphysique*), Vladimir Jankélévitch (*Philosophie première*), Étienne Gilson (*L'Être et l'essence*), Stanislas Breton (*Du principe*), Louis Lavelle (the four volumes of *La dialectique de l'éternel présent*), Nicolas Berdiaev (*Essai de métaphysique eschatologique*), Gabriel Marcel (*Journal métaphysique, Le mystère de l'être*), Maurice Nédoncelle (*Intersubjectivité et ontologie*), Aimé Forest (*Du consentement à l'être*), Maurice Blondel (*L'être et les êtres*), Jean-Paul Sartre (*L'être et le néant*), Étienne Souriau (*Les différents modes d'existence*). Of course, though explicitly metaphysical projects, all these works do not have the same importance, but it would be at least instructive to reevaluate their positions with respect to contemporary experiences.

While remaining particularly attentive to the French context, it seems necessary to conclude this synthesis with some projections for the future by examining the question of the analytic-continental divide once more in an optimistic light.

10. Towards the improbable reunion of metaphysics?

In some French university milieux (the instruction of analytic metaphysics exempted in the majority of preparatory classes and programs of the *agrégation* is sufficient testimony to this damaging “forgetting”¹⁵⁶), provincialism,¹⁵⁷ which has often contributed to understating the importance of analytic metaphysics – with some notable exceptions¹⁵⁸ – keeps, in the same way, the outdated binary schema that contrasts “French Theory” with an analytic philosophy steeped in logical positivism. Neither of the opposing “parties” in contemporary metaphysical debates should be reduced to these “trademarks” of the last century. Part of the eristic caricature of the analytic-continental “debate” in metaphysics seems to come out of rearguard combats. Not that the differences between these two traditions are negligible or illusory; they are undeniable, and sometimes appear – we should know – abysmal. However, as the violence of subtle discourse at times seems to show, the true problem of the “schism” is not the virulence of the discussions,¹⁵⁹ but rather the very absence of debates; polemics most often invade the place of discussion, with each camp holding to its positions (or its prejudices). “In short, the exchanges between the two camps have made matters worse rather than better”,¹⁶⁰ as Hans-Johann Glock writes in a book on analytic philosophy and its history that has recently been translated into French.

Of course, France has had its “smugglers”: during the generation 1920-1945, Louis Couturat, Jacques Herbrand, Jean Nicod, Émile Meyerson, Jean Cavailles, Albert Lautman; then during the generation 1945-1970, Gilles Gaston Granger, Jules Vuillemin; finally in the 1970s, Jacques Bouveresse, Claude Imbert, Jean Largeault, Paul Ricœur, Francis Jacques and Denis Zaslavsky. Today, they are even more numerous and some welcome large audiences. But the implantation of an analytic ferment in “continental” territory is not enough to make a dispassionate dialogue emerge. As Father Van Breda had already said in 1958 to the analytics who faced him: “When we see each other, we are sometimes too polite, and very seldom honest. It is the pure and simple truth, I believe, to say that there are a lot of continentals who have no real interest in your philosophy. And I dare say that it is the same thing for you towards the continentals.” And, he rightly added, “we clarify the discussion so much by saying this openly”.¹⁶¹ Far from improving the quality of publications and the debate over antagonistic hypothesis, the effects of the “schism” are thus essentially negative, creating a climate of bitterness and pushing some to adopt the martyr’s position (in France, analytics tend to feel like minorities and marginalized, the continentals “invaded”, and on both sides we find attitudes of *resistance* – we certainly saw this during the pseudo-scandal of the nomination of Claudine Tiercelin at the Collège de France). Accompanying this is the related phenomenon of the reciprocal invisibility of publications.¹⁶²

As in every good western, today the question that matters seems more than ever: “Which side are you on, boy?”¹⁶³ The injunction is particularly perceptible among students who have not yet chosen their camp. Of course, the choice in favor of continental philosophy, is made more often “by default” than the opposite choice, facilitated by the French tendency to assimilate philosophy in general to an exegesis of the history of philosophy. In this respect, it is not insignificant to see some French university students mention the year of their “analytic turn” in their academic path, an irrevocable conversion that strongly affects the orientation of a career.

However, as we have fully observed, the adversaries of metaphysics exist in every camp, and will mount a fresh attack.¹⁶⁴ Can we imagine that these partisans of each side will form a united front in the near or distant future? Let us quote Dean Zimmerman’s enlightened commentary:

The impression that there is a deep, principled difference between analytic philosophy and other traditions has proven pernicious for the health of metaphysics (and other subfields, too, no doubt), separating natural allies and preventing healthy criticism from being heard across various analytic/non-analytic divides. It is to be hoped that metaphysicians who think of analytic philosophy as fundamentally hostile to metaphysics will discover that the classic, substantive questions of their subject are high on the analytic agenda once again – indeed, that they have been quite high on the agenda for well over half of analytic philosophy’s history, including its earliest chapters. And it is also to be hoped that metaphysicians in analytic circles will be open to the best contemporary work originating within metaphysical traditions too long alienated from analytic philosophy – e.g., neo-Thomism, neo-Platonism, process philosophy, personalism, idealism.¹⁶⁵

If we can remain sceptical of Zimmerman’s optimism, we cannot ignore the good intentions of his discourse, as evidenced by his illuminating examination of the history of analytic philosophy – which had never been a part of its, let us repeat, anti-metaphysical project. Moreover, philosophers with very diverse perspectives share some of his conclusions. Alain de Libera writes that “a serious confrontation of the points of view is necessary. It is desirable. It is possible.”¹⁶⁶ Hans-Johann Glock nevertheless articulates the naïve hope of an alliance:

If the analytic/continental contrast has become obsolete, it is not because we have moved on to a new and thriving synthesis. But perhaps it has simply been superseded by other divides.¹⁶⁷

However, it would be dishonest not to also mention the sceptical commentaries on the question.¹⁶⁸ Frédéric Nef judges that this perspective is premature:

I do not believe that the moment of the great unification between phenomenology and the analytic thought of the epistemological or Wittgensteinian style has arrived: as in physics, unification will come at the time of a much more powerful theory, and not through collage or by joining the various concerned fields.¹⁶⁹

For example, Jean-Michel Roy makes use of theoretical physics by unexpectedly taking up Thomas Kuhn’s much disputed work on scientific revolutions,¹⁷⁰ but nevertheless gives conclusions more favorable to the reunion.

During the past few years, several initiatives have hinted at dialogue. With respect to metaphysics, this élan has recently occasioned collections such as *Ce peu d’espace autour*, which philosophers of various persuasions – Tiercelin, Meillassoux, and Marion – have contributed to.¹⁷¹ But the most important embodiment of metaphysical diversity in France is perhaps the Groupe “Métaphysique à l’ENS” formed by Francis Wolff some years ago, behind the collectively published *Pourquoi y a-t-il quelque chose plutôt que rien ?*¹⁷² The idea of a reunion is still fragile.

We must reexamine the history of the analytic-continental divide and rediscover the prolific and unclassifiable metaphysicians of the twentieth century, from Meinong to Ingarden. Let us quote again the generous, though prudent, speech that Jean Wahl made when faced with his illustrious Anglo-Saxon audience in 1958:

If there is an agreement, if there were by chance a possible agreement between phenomenology and analytic philosophy, perhaps this would be this: truth. But what does the truth mean? This is precisely one of the questions we are all faced with.¹⁷³

Jean Wahl's remark is not simply rhetorical; what emerges behind the perhaps naïve and illusory idea of a reunion of metaphysics is above all the long and complex process that ought to reestablish a serious conception of truth and knowledge at the heart of the ontological project. The struggle against hereditary enemies – scepticism and deflationism – is the affair of all philosophical currents despite their divisions, and today it would be dangerous for whoever wants to be a metaphysician to claim to go it alone.

In conclusion, this is why the “ecumenical” (and not syncretical)¹⁷⁴ program of the *Atelier de métaphysique et d'ontologie contemporaines* is not simply the expression of student naïveté or of a “philosophically correct” compromise. At a time when certain analytic philosophers discuss and even defend Heideggerian theses¹⁷⁵ and others advocate the reunion of the two traditions embodied by the trinomials “Frege-Russell-Wittgenstein” and “Brentano-Husserl-Ingarden” around recent developments of formal ontology,¹⁷⁶ it is to be hoped that the project of tackling head on the different conceptions of metaphysics judged incommensurable is not completely in vain. To steer clear of the polemical effects of the analytic-continental schism without neglecting the often radical differences nor collapsing them into an unjustified meta-ontological relativism;¹⁷⁷ the exercise is perilous, but worthwhile enough to be humbly and collectively attempted.

Notes

Translator's note: Unless the citation is from an English-language source, or has already been translated into English, the following and the above translations are the translator's own. The translator's additions are in brackets.

1. Volpi (1999) p.88 (our emphasis). The author closes his article with this conclusion, at the least partisan and contestable: “One must recognize that nowadays – given the logico-empirical reasons deployed by Carnap, the logico-analytic reasons shown by Wittgenstein, the historical reasons evoked by Heidegger, and the historical reasons indicated by Habermas – one cannot employ the word ‘metaphysics’ without becoming suspect. We are no longer concerned with what metaphysics has been, and can no longer concern ourselves with a mere repetition of it. We can solely undertake a critical analysis of it.” (Ibid., p.88). Worse still: “One cannot resurrect the idea of metaphysics as *epistêmê* without at the same time continuing the idea of *theoria* as form of life, as supreme *praxis*. There is a *good reason* for saying that since Aristotle, metaphysics has made no step forward.” (Ibid., p.89).
2. Nef (2004). See in particular the first part (“*La Métaphysique n'est pas morte*” [“Metaphysics is not dead”]), which establishes the stakes of the question, the second part (“*La mort lui va si bien*” [“Death is going so well for it”]), which primarily concentrates on the Kantian and Derridean critiques, and the third and fourth parts, which examine and refute the Heideggerian thesis of the “ontotheological” constitution of metaphysics from a historical point of view.
3. On the history and coherence of the philosophical use of the term “analysis” (especially in Kant and Bolzano), see Lapointe (2008). For an examination of the connections between metaphysics and analysis, see Zaslavsky (1982).
4. Sections 2 and 3 introduce the main characteristics of metaphysics such as it is practiced, with much

vitality, in the “world” of analytic philosophy (which is also, whether we know it or not, our world). On the thorny question of the analytic-continental schism, see section 4, and on the consequences of this divide in France, see section 9. Finally, on the improbable perspective of a “reunification” of metaphysics, see section 10.

5. See Zimmerman’s clarification (2004).

6. Wittgenstein [1921] (1993a), p.90.

7. Wittgenstein [1921] (1993a), p.10.

8. Of course, due to a lack of space, we can only offer a pithy and superficial characterization of the question that traverses the work of the early Wittgenstein from end to end. For a general introduction to the different problems of the *Tractatus*, see Chauviré (2009).

9. The term “exceeding” [or “elimination”], used by Carnap and Heidegger, is perhaps a bit clumsy. The following excerpt, dating from 1931, no doubt better expresses the (necessary) ambiguity of Wittgenstein’s attitude towards metaphysics: “I now believe that it would be right to begin my book with remarks about metaphysics as a kind of magic. But in doing this I must not make a case for magic nor may I make fun of it. The depth of magic should be preserved. Indeed, here the elimination of magic has itself the character of magic itself.” (Wittgenstein [1931] (1993b), p.116)

10. Moreover, we can ask what Wittgenstein himself would have thought about the historical and interpretive wave that his writings inspired!

11. The manifesto and the principal articles of the Vienna Circle are translated [in French] by Soulez (1985). For a detailed introduction to the doctrines and history of the Circle, see Schmitz (2009).

12. Wittgenstein [1921] (1993a), p.31.

13. “Earlier, when we were reading Wittgenstein’s book [the *Tractatus*] in the Circle, I had erroneously believed that his attitude toward metaphysics was similar to ours. I have not paid sufficient attention to the statements in his book about the mystical, because his feelings and thoughts in this area were too divergent from mine. [...] I had the impression that his ambivalence with respect to metaphysics was only a special aspect of a more basic internal conflict in his personality from which he suffered deeply and painfully.” (Carnap (1963), p.27).

14. Soulez (1985), p.160 [in French]. [Carnap [1931] (1959), p.64-65 in English.].

15. [Hegel [1807] (1931), p.696], cited as an example by Nef (2004), p.156.

16. Translated [in French] in Soulez (1985), p.183. [Translated in English in Schlick [1926] (1979), p.107.].

17. This thesis is especially directed against Bergson, who in his “Introduction to Metaphysics” (in *La pensée et le mouvant*) affirmed the superiority of intuition, as allowing us access to “the absolute”, over analysis. In this respect, this text from 1903 launches an essential schema in the later development of the analytic-continental divide. However, the systematic opposition between intuition and analysis is detrimental: every metaphysics, as scientific as tries to be, would never completely be able to avoid the recourse to intuition. Even a discipline as rigorous as formal ontology requires some use of intuition (see section 6).

18. Nevertheless, Schlick admits that metaphysical texts can then be read as “conceptual poems”, which, following the example of poetry, nourish life and not knowledge. But Carnap is not as charitable. Beginning from the principle that “art is the appropriate means of expression, and metaphysics is an inappropriate means to represent the sentiment of life”, he concludes that metaphysicians are comparable to “musicians without musical talent”. [Schlick [1926] (1979), p.110-111]

19. Cf. Benoist (2004): “The odds are that Carnap would have been easily confirmed by the contemporary developments of phenomenology, which had clearly placed it on a terrain quite distant from the empirical positivity that he objected to in the Heideggerian existential dramaturgy.”

20. Nef (2004), p.158.

21. In addition, we know that the presence of the observer in relation to the experimental device has taken on an importance without precedent in quantum physics. In this sense, every “protocol sentence” is dependent upon the scientist who establishes it. This is why contemporary theoretical physics is so vulnerable to idealism. Cf. Tiercelin (2011): “it is clear enough that the idealist menace weighs at least as much and even more and more on science as on metaphysics” (p.28).

22. However, this argument still motivates some of the anti-realist attacks concerning the absence of a solution to metaphysical debates today.

23. In reality, Carnap tried, in *The Logical Structure of the World*, to adopt an attitude of “neutrality” towards

metaphysical problems. The logical reconstruction of concepts, according to him, validates neither realism nor idealism. But, as Nef (2004) remarks, “if one speaks about the neutrality between two theses A and B, this implies that one gives meaning to A and B” (p.167).

24. Heidegger [1935] (1983), p.227-228, cited by Volpi (1999). [Whether deliberately or not, Heidegger’s note, found in the annex of the *Gesamtausgabe*, is absent from extant English translations of the *Introduction to Metaphysics*. The translators, then, ironically repeat Heidegger’s gesture by failing to name the so-called adversary...]

25. Sylvan (1997), p.167 (cf. *infra* on the rapprochement between Heidegger and Wittgenstein). Benoist (2004) summarizes the situation thus: “The philosophy of the twentieth century, retrospectively, reflects the image of a strange battlefield: as if, at the heart of the 1930s, which certainly constituted the epicenter of this century, the point at which the decisive ruptures were accomplished, underwent an entire series of bewildered movements around the supposed corpse of metaphysics. Later, on the one hand, there are those who were persuaded that they inhabited a world ‘after the end of metaphysics’ and who taxed the others with a prejudicial naïveté which would have made them remain on this side of the invisible limit thus crossed; on the other hand, there were the aforementioned naïve, but who considered the first, justifiably, as the true and only metaphysicians, and fought against them as such, believing themselves as the only true possessors of the critique of metaphysics.” (p.176).

26. The question of the connection of Heidegger to Husserl is of course more complex. We can nevertheless cite Benoist’s (2004) illuminating commentary: “In principle, the Heideggerian critique of phenomenology is phenomenological. The phenomenological method that Husserl had put to work is contested in Heidegger’s critique, at least at the beginning, as ‘non-phenomenological’ (*unphänomenologisch*) in its expectations, that is to say, as *insufficiently phenomenological*. It concerns not less, but more, always more describing, not less returning to the immanence of the given, but always advancing more in the immanence of the given, by modifying the meaning of it – by observing that it cannot correctly be qualified as *subject*, other than by a metaphysical prejudice, but must be it as being, which is always encountered in the dimension of a world” (p.172). Or even: “It is from the demand for the return to the very things that everything becomes possible, from the moment when this return is no longer understood as fascination [*Bennommenheit*] and placed at the disposition of a constituting consciousness, but instead as a pure letting-be [*Seinlassen*] of the thing.” (Ibid.).

27. Heidegger [1929] (1997), p.162.

28. Heidegger [1957] (1960), p.48.

29. Heidegger (1972), p.24, cited by J.-L. Marion (1999).

30. Volpi (1999), p.81.

31. See in particular Nef (2004) for a critical treatment of the question. Pierre Aubenque, Jean-Marc Narbonne, Alain de Libera, Jean-Luc Marion, and Jean-François Courtine have shown the limits of the Heideggerian thesis in various scholarly historical studies. For example, Heidegger especially neglects the entire neo-Platonist tradition of henology.

32. Courtine (1999), p.157. One can moreover argue that this “destinal historialism”, which supports the thesis of the exceeding of metaphysics, is itself particularly metaphysical. Cf. Benoist (2004): “The difficulty of the Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian problematic of the exceeding of metaphysics seems, furthermore, to result from its specifically...*metaphysical* character. Indeed, how can one fail to recognize, in this teleological vision of history in which a principle, named “metaphysics”, would be fulfilled up to its reversal into an examination and technological mastery of the world, a larval form of historical idealism? How can one believe that “metaphysics” is the foundation of the history of the world? The repetition of structures of historical idealism – and, to be more precise, of Hegelian idealism – is all the more absolute, given that it is presented in the form of a radical exceeding of this idealism, and speaks about a beyond that gives it the intelligibility and the whole of the process, including idealism and its catastrophe.” (p.175).

33. Aubenque (2009).

34. In Heidegger’s own words, this comes down to writing a “history of being as metaphysics”. Heidegger [1941] (1973).

35. Courtine (2005). One can place these works in the double lineage of Heidegger and Pierre Aubenque.

36. This is the term that Alain de Libera, in claiming Foucauldian heritage, has also used, notably in his monumental study on the emergence of the modern concept of the “subject” in the Middle Ages.

37. Courtine (2005), Introduction. The back cover also states: “By distinguishing the different ‘ages’ of metaphysics, and by emphasizing the very determined conditions of its (Arab-Latin) interpretation as onto-

theology, the present research hopes to contribute to relaunching the writing of its histories, which every future metaphysics – analytic or not – would not know how to avoid.”

38. The widespread idea in France that certain Heideggerian terms are untranslatable is indicative of the venerable indefinable character that they sometimes seem to be haloed in – without even addressing the observations on the philosophical essence of the German language, inheritor of the so-called “originary” superiority of the Greek language. Nevertheless, the theme of *Ereignis*, at the heart of the Heideggerian *Kehre*, is complex, and can only here be vastly simplified.

39. Aubenque (2009).

40. The rapprochement between Heidegger and Wittgenstein has become especially fashionable since Richard Rorty’s considerations in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. It is a good idea, however, to clarify that some notes written by the two philosophers clearly indicate that they did not agree with each others’ analyses. See M. Marion (2011).

41. For a critical history of this “hermeneutic turn” of phenomenology, see Grondin (2003).

42. According to Grondin (2003), there are three major conceptions of “hermeneutics” in Heidegger: the first hermeneutic of facticity (1923), the hermeneutic of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* (1927), and the later hermeneutic of the history of metaphysics.

43. Gadamer (1991), p.22, cited by Rodier (2011).

44. Ricœur [1975] (1977), p.311.

45. Gadamer (2000b), p.703-704, cited by Rodier (2011).

46. Gadamer (2000c), p.85, cited by Rodier (2011). [Gadamer (2003), p.79]

47. Gadamer (2000a), p.210, cited by Rodier (2011). For Gadamer, this type of experience of the transcendent is encountered especially in recognition and gratitude.

48. Gadamer (1982), p.11, cited by Rodier (2011). The philosopher is careful to specify that, even and above all “in our scientific age”, “we need not apologise for asking questions which we cannot answer.” We can ask why our age would be more “scientific” than, for example, in the Renaissance or ancient Greece – which were just as “philosophical”, if that makes any sense. The strategy of denigrating “technicist” scientificity to the benefit of an *authentic* philosophical questioning is undoubtedly a Heideggerian heritage. For an examination of the questions “how” and “why”, which were supposed to distinguish science and philosophy, see section 2.

49. Gadamer (1994), p.110, cited by Rodier (2011). Moreover, we can amuse ourselves by replacing “metaphysics” with “faith” without the meaning of the phrase being radically transformed...

50. Derrida (1997), p.4.

51. Ibid.

52. Aubenque (2009).

53. Ibid., p.60.

54. Ibid., p.61 (our emphasis).

55. Ibid., p.63.

56. Nef (2004) (p.180) takes up the analyses of Kevin Mulligan and Vincent Descombes, which highlight the main Derridean “sophisms”. Sylvan (1997) develops a “deconstruction of deconstruction” through dialectic logic – one of the forms of paraconsistent logic – which avoids the paradoxes connected to self-referentiality.

57. Aubenque (2009) locates this attitude in the lineage of neo-Platonism and Renish mysticism, which Derrida discussed in several works.

58. Habermas [1988] (1993).

59. Ibid., p.34.

60. Ibid., p.29.

61. Nef (2004), p.89.

62. Ryle (1932).

63. Ibid., p.143.

64. Ryle thanks Kant for having clarified the concept of existence in his refutation of the ontological proof, but nevertheless reproaches him for not having gone far enough – that is to say, for not having seen that “God” is not the logical subject of the statement “God exists”.

65. In *The Concept of Mind* (1949), Ryle attacks mental concepts so as to reveal the absurdity of the problem – eminently metaphysical – of mind-body dualism.

66. For a more developed critique of “linguisticism” in general, see section 3.

67. Putnam (2004) presents the most recent formulation of it.
68. A mereological sum is a whole that results from the “mereological” fusion of its parts, that is to say, that *adds* something to the autonomous existence of entities of which it is composed as *whole*. Let us take the example of a space containing two objects. For a defender of the existence of mereological sums, this space, in reality, contains three entities: two objects and the “whole” constituted by these two objects. For a defender of the inexistence of such sums, on the contrary, the room only contains two entities, and the fact that one can consider the set that contains these two entities as elements adds *nothing more* to the existence of these two entities. On this point, see sections 6 and 7.
69. Putnam (2004), p.43.
70. *Ibid.*, p.85.
71. Putnam thinks that metaphysics runs counter to common sense, whereas Peirce, who was himself an illustrious representative of pragmatism, thinks, on the contrary, that metaphysics is partly connected to common sense, as long as we have a critical approach towards it. Cf. Peirce (1931), §129.
72. Nef (2004), p.25.
73. La Fontaine, “The Cat Metamorphosed into a Woman”, Book II, fable 18, v.41-42.
74. J.-L. Marion (1999), p.30. The comparison with Jean-Luc Marion’s earlier statement almost makes one smile: “Obviously, since metaphysics has reached its end, either as a completion with Hegel, or as a twilight with Nietzsche, philosophy has only been able to genuinely continue in the form of phenomenology” (J.-L. Marion and Planty-Bonjour (1984), p.7).
75. Benoist (2004), p.180. The pusilanimous exhortation to always go beyond everything in theoretical matters, and, with even more complacency, to exceed the exceeding, was one of the twentieth-century leitmotifs, sometimes in the form of a Hegelian or Nietzschean vestige (foreshadowing, for our new century, the “post-” era: postmodernism, post-structuralism, and of course post-metaphysical thought). Why couldn’t metaphysics continue to calmly pose the important problems that an age-old tradition, that one pretended to confine to an antique shop, had bequeathed it? “We were not convinced that philosophy had really changed in nature, or, *a fortiori*, was beginning to disappear – this threat was presented as its ultimate hope – or transforming into another fundamentally different type of thought. Yet phenomenology is certainly not the abyss where it ought to be swallowed up and/or regenerated once and for all.” (p.175).
76. “Whence the tempting representation, shared today at least by a large number of French phenomenologists, of a phenomenology that would come ‘after the end of metaphysics’, as its *completion* and its natural *dissolution*.” (Benoist (2004), p.173).
77. Let us quote Jean-Luc Marion again, this time to illustrate this rhetoric: “metaphysics [...] does not cease to go beyond itself. [...] Moreover, the successive shifts of historically accomplished metaphysics [...] already in fact mobilize this intrinsic property of metaphysics – to exceed, to exceed the exceeding, in short to exceed itself.” (J.-L. Marion (1999), p.33).
78. Putnam (2002), p.101.
79. Engel (2010).
80. Tiercelin (1995), p.401.
81. Nef (2004). Note however that the second part of *Qu’est-ce que la métaphysique ?*, paired with an essentially critical first part intended to rehabilitate metaphysics from the criticisms of its famous detractors, concentrates on the diverse developments of analytic metaphysics. Our synthesis attempts to approach non-analytic metaphysics at the risk of skimming over the question and of invalidating the supposed cohesiveness of the discipline and of its practices (on the question of this “ecumenicalism”, see section 10).
82. On this point, see Tiercelin (1995) as well as Brisson’s (1999) illuminating analysis.
83. Varzi [2005] (2011).
84. As for Meinong, his “theory of the object” must, according to him, go further than ontology (even if for convenience his position is comparable to (2a)). The second proposition, to summarize it clearly by avoiding this type of circumstantial confusion, consists, contrary to (1), in asserting the primacy of *quodditas* over *quidditas*.
85. Varzi [2005] (2011), p.25.
86. Smith (2003), p.155.
87. On the contemporary conception of formal ontology, see section 6.
88. We neglect the the fact that, as Frédéric Nef has emphasized in several places, the difference between physical inquiry and metaphysical inquiry could not come down to a simplistic distinction between “how”

questions and “why” questions. Rather, there are two types of “how” questions and two types of “why” questions that one ought to distinguish: “Of course the classification of questions into how and why does not cover up the distinction between physical type questions and metaphysical type questions. In fact, four types of theoretical questions exist: physical why questions (why is the sky blue?), physical how questions (how do the physical laws emerge from primordial chaos?), metaphysical why questions (why is there order?) and metaphysical how questions (how do objects become concrete?).” (Nef (2007), p.24, n.32).

89. Tiercelin (2011), p.16. Cf. Mulligan (2000), p.5-33. The question of meta-ontology will be treated in the following section.

90. Strawson (1959).

91. Jedrzejewski (2011).

92. On the inappropriate and ambiguous character of the term “continental”, see section 4 and note 157.

93. More precisely, as Benoist (2004), p.172 writes: “There is an anti-metaphysical component in phenomenology in the sense that it refuses pre-constituted theories that separate us, or are supposed to separate us, from phenomena. But this post-positivist sense of the critique of metaphysics in no way excludes the objective of a metaphysics, which is presented by Husserl himself as its ultimate, and as yet unachieved, accomplishment of phenomenological research.”

94. Benoist (2004), p.167. On the relations between phenomenology and analytic philosophy, see section 4.

95. Mulligan suggests in several places that the most adequate way of defining a “continental” approach towards metaphysics is to say that it holds on to a sort of *continuum* where we find, at one extreme, historical, sociological, and political reflections (inheriting partly from the Hegelian dialectic and from its materialist inversion in Marx), and, at the other extreme, a philosophy of existence that instead focuses on idiosyncratic experiences.

96. We think mostly of Alain Badiou’s and Quentin Meillassoux’s works, which we will examine again in section 9.

97. If we believe Žižek, “postmodernism” (from Heidegger to ecology by way of Marxism, feminism, and the avatars of deconstruction!) is on a crusade against the Cartesian subject and the Hegelian pretension to absolute knowledge. But his own use of the term “metaphysics” is at the very least fluctuating, for example, in the following phrase: “The ‘postmodern’ epoch demands that we abandon metaphysical and political projects because they equivocate between totality and totalitarianism.” (Žižek (2011)).

98. Tiercelin (1995), p.478-481.

99. Putnam (1992), p.187.

100. Heil and Martin (1999).

101. Ibid., p.36. Aiming in particular at Ayer and Wisdom, Heil and Martin state: “Rather than purging philosophy of ontology, the practice of semantic ascent has rather served as an evasion or obfuscation of ontological views. Proponents have pretended that entailments were possible when they are not. When entailments have had to be abandoned for nonentailment ontological reductions, they have refused to see these reductions as ontological and have labeled only the entailment form as phenomenalism, etc.” (Ibid., p.57, n.2.).

Cf. also Heil (2003), p.3: “An adequate conceptualization of the world and our place in it is founded, not on the analysis of concepts, but on an adequate ontology. Ontology is not an analytical enterprise. Earlier I noted that in engaging in ontological investigation we are endeavouring to make sense of issues we should otherwise find perplexing. The issues in question arise in the sciences, in the humanities, and in everyday life. To this extent they include an ineliminable empirical element. My belief is that, if we get the ontology right, these issues will take care of themselves in the sense: the remaining questions will be largely empirical hence susceptible to techniques we standardly deploy in answering empirical questions.”

102. Heil (2003).

103. The problem does not concern so much the statement of the relation of supervenience, but rather its foundation, that is to say truth-making capacity.

104. Chalmers, Manley, and Wasserman (2009).

105. Peacocke (1999), chapter 1.

106. Ibid., p.1.

107. As Mulligan, Simons, and Smith (2006) remark. It is partly this tendency that has caused some to accuse analytic philosophy of being technicist and “scholastic”.

108. Mulligan (1998) employs, with the same irony, the expression “The Great Divide”. Engel (1997) prefers

to soberly name his dialogue *La Dispute*. The rather recent term “schism” (for example in Roy (2010)), more or less precisely datable by historians, reveals the common origin – notably in Brentano and his students – of certain traditions unanimously recognized as antagonistic. For an insight into the state of the situation in France and some (optimistic) perspectives on the future, see sections 9 and 10.

109. Cahiers de Royaumont (1962).

110. Dummett (1993).

111. Daubert (1877-1947), who Husserl recognized as one of his most brilliant students, was rediscovered thanks to the work of Karl Schuhmann and Barry Smith.

112. Reinach (1883-1917) was the leader of the phenomenological school of Munich. Specifically, he was the first philosopher – before Russell – to propose an examination of negative states of affairs.

113. Ingarden (1894-1970) was, perhaps with the exception of Hartmann, one of the greatest non-analytic metaphysicians of the twentieth century. In particular, he was one of the primary opponents of the idealist turn of his master Husserl, though they nevertheless maintained close ties of friendship. His *magnum opus*, *Spór o istnienie Świata* [*The Controversy on the Existence of the World*], a monumental 1700 pages, introduces an original and exhaustive ontology that, we can only regret, has been so little studied.

114. Mulligan (2000), p.5.

115. Alain Badiou does not hesitate to label this supposed archaism with the adjective “scholastic”, using the pejorative meaning of the term inherited from a Romantic distrust for the medieval *disputatio* and fantasized obscurity of the Gothic age. This unspoken devaluation that the philosophers of the Middle Ages suffer from is due to their relatively marginal place in philosophical instruction in France – the same assessment can be made, more or less, of the (pagan) philosophers of Late Antiquity.

116. Kotarbiński (1966), p.514, cited by Przełęcki (1989).

117. Mulligan (2000), p.5.

118. Here we touch on the confusion in certain debates on anti-realism, which is sometimes characterized as any opposition to the realism of the external world, and other times characterized as any opposition to metaphysics in general. Yet, as we will see, in the twenty-first century we can certainly be metaphysicians without being realists in these precise senses.

119. The ambiguity of the term “realism” in contemporary metaphysics is well-known. Generally, realism indicates the position that accepts reality independent of a certain type of entity. The most recent employment of the term refers to the realism of the external world – the thesis according to which the world exists independently of the consciousness that we have of it. Nevertheless, there exist virtually as many forms of realism as entities we can bestow reality upon: realism of universals (universals exist independently of our concepts), mathematical realism (mathematical entities exist by themselves), moral realism (moral values exist by themselves), “alethic” realism (an objective truth exists), modal realism (possible worlds exist), “Meinongian” realism (even non-existent objects have a form of subsistence), etc. Section 7 develops the question of the ontological inflationism by examining the problem of Ockham’s razor.

120. Meinong (1904).

121. Lewis (1986).

122. Very recently, Takashi Yagisawa (2009) formulated a heterodox version of modal realism.

123. Foster (1982) and Foster (2008).

124. Sprigge (1984).

125. Hare (2009).

126. Simons (2007).

127. Smith (2005). The same assessment has been made by numerous metaphysicians; cf. Nef’s (2009), Varzi’s (2005) and Heil’s (2003) clarifications.

128. Mulligan (2000).

129. Cocchiarella (2007), p.23.

130. Meixner (1997).

131. The most complete synthesis on mereology remains Simons (1987).

132. Cf. the third *Logical Investigation*. On Husserlian mereology, see Fine (1995).

133. Gärdenfors (2000).

134. Cf. in particular Casati and Varzi (1999).

135. Correia (2005).

136. Cf. for example Casati (2008).

137. From the *Quaestiones et decisiones in quattuor libros Sententiarum Petri Lombardi* (Book II) and the *Summa Totius Logicae*, respectively. An expression is often attributed to Ockham, but absent from his works: “*Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*” (it is not necessary to multiply entities except necessity).
138. Tiercelin (2002), p.565.
139. Armstrong (1989), p.20.
140. Lewis (1986).
141. Smith (1978), p.43.
142. Mulligan (2000).
143. Bennett (2009).
144. But having done this, they unavoidably attract anti-realist suspicions: the more antagonistic positions appear the same, the more the debate, however fierce, seems vain (according to the idea that, *more or less*, the metaphysicians who debate are in agreement). As Bennett (2009) shows, this is largely an optical illusion that we should blame the metaphysicians themselves for, and attribute to their obsession with not wanting to be labeled as *ontological extravagants*.
145. Varzi [2005] (2011).
146. Mulligan, Simons, and Smith (2006).
147. Bennett (2009) notes that in the discussion of anti-realism, all the metaphysical debates are worthless, and some are privileged targets. For example, for the adversaries of ontology, the problems of material composition and co-location are symptomatic of an empty or trivial debate. Nevertheless, the critique by Mulligan, Simons, and Smith has nothing to do with the anti-realist attacks, but rather, for these committed realist metaphysicians, with the results of their own practice.
148. Claudine Tiercelin, who claims a pragmatist heritage, has also declared in an interview on the site www.mediapart.fr: “I think that thought does not merit an hour of pain if it does not allow us to better direct and guide ourselves in our actions”.
149. Cf. Casati, Smith, and Varzi (1998).
150. Cf. Ehrlich, Mark, and Smith (2008).
151. Cf. Casati and Smith (1993).
152. Putnam (2002), p.124.
153. Courtine (2007), introduction.
154. As Aude Lancelin recently described her in an article in the *Nouvel Observateur* (14 June 2011), which in any event has no other aim than to fuel sterile polemical fire, and demonstrates complete ignorance of Claudine Tiercelin’s work. The open letter from Jacques Bouveresse to Aude Lancelin published on the blog of the publisher édition Agone (<http://blog.agone.org>) sums up this distorted and quasi-tauromachian media manipulation of the analytic-continental debate.
155. Tiercelin (2011).
156. For my *mémoire de khâgneux*, I remember a professor of philosophy claiming that metaphysics is limited *grosso modo* to three questions – “substances and accidents”, the problem of the existence of God, “why is there something rather than nothing?” – and explaining, through narrow-mindedness on these subjects, the fact that the *jury du concours* of the ENS is not always inclined to include metaphysics in its philosophy program.
157. In his open letter to Aude Lancelin, Jacques Bouveresse talks about “philosophical nationalism”, especially in response to Alain Badiou’s lapidary remarks on the transformation of the Collège de France into “an old-fashioned sub-prefecture of American analytic philosophy, favoring the conservative consensus to the detriment of the contemporary innovator”. Let us remark in addition that there is no reason to say that metaphysics, such as it is actually practiced in the world of analytic philosophy, would be exclusively, even essentially *American* – except to include, among others, in this fantasized America: Australia, the United Kingdom, a good part of “continental” Europe (in particular, Scandinavia, Poland, Switzerland, Spain, Germany, Italy, and even France), and Japan. Conversely, “French theory” is particularly in vogue in the United States, and certainly not in the departments of philosophy, but within disciplines as varied as literature, sociology, anthropology, and the diverse “cultural studies” waning to infinity on the same model (gender studies, ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, etc.) Moreover, this is precisely why the distinction *analytic versus continental* reflects a blatant imbalance and incoherence, by opposing a methodological criteria employed in several directions to a geographic criteria that is at the very least vague and

questionable. Let us recall, with Mulligan (1998), Bernard Williams' witticism: dividing philosophy between analytic philosophy and continental philosophy comes down to dividing cars between Japanese cars and cars with rear-wheel drive... Cf. also Smith (2006).

158. Let us mention especially the EHESS [École des hautes études en sciences sociales], to a certain extent the ENS [École normale supérieure] (although the physical distance separating 29 and 45 rue d'Ulm sometimes seems to ironically reflect the tendencies of philosophical orientation), and finally, last but not least, the Collège de France. Claudine Tiercelin's remarks on this subject are rather bitter: "an analytic philosopher, whatever one can say about a so-called improvement of things, and on the ceaselessly growing group of people who would like to see him given a place in the institution, continues to be tolerated even as he does not truly partake in the 'normal' institutional landscape." (online interview at www.mediapart.fr). Let us not forget that it was at Althusser's demand that Jacques Bouveresse gave courses on analytic philosophy at the ENS from 1966-1969. Unfortunately, the experiment, attempted again by Frédéric Nef some years ago, did not seem to have had the same success. We must no doubt see there the persistence of deep-rooted prejudices against analytic philosophy – to which a slightly vague conception of a menacing linguistic turn is still associated, by many newly minted students from preparatory classes.

159. We could evoke the "gigantomachic" paradigm of the controversy that divided Searle and Derrida; the purely polemical appearance and the personal nature of the disagreement still often overshadow our memories of the content of the debate. Engel (2011), being ironic about the cult of the *spectacular*, identifies this as a journalistic tendency towards contemporary philosophy: everyone knew that "Derrida's reading on Searle was much more droll than the reverse".

160. Glock (2008), p.257.

161. Cahiers de Royaumont (1962), p.344.

162. Cf. Zimmerman (2004). This assessment is not always valid in what we could call, at the risk of creating a geography of the phenomenon, "border zones" – of which the rue d'Ulm could be a pertinent example.

163. Zimmerman (2004), p.ix.

164. If the critique of metaphysics surpasses the limits of the analytic-continental divide, its defense should be everyone's affair. For instance, the habitual rapprochement between the Wittgensteinian and Heideggerian critiques of metaphysics – the limits of which we have certainly emphasized – nevertheless suggests that the arguments invoked by metaphysicians on all sides in order to defend their discipline could be the same. Examples of such a common argumentative line can be found in the sketch that Tiercelin makes of it (1995), in the first part of Nef (2004), and, to a certain extent, in Tiercelin's (2011) substantial developments.

165. Zimmerman (2004), p.xxi.

166. Libera (1999).

167. Glock (2008), p.257.

168. Claudine Tiercelin is one of the most sceptical in France, despite having for a long time maintained the dialogue. Questioned on philosophical eclecticism, she responds: "After being very broadly devoted to it, believing to do good, and in trying to reconcile, in a word, irreconcilable philosophical styles, I had admitted to myself that, under the cover of a welcoming pluralist attitude, we had above all succumbed to intellectual laziness, and, in order to finish, that we lost our soul there. In philosophy, it is necessary to choose and to be committed. Philosophy is in this respect like life: an executioner of possibilities. Everything is not possible at the same time." She still asserts: "I believe I am, of all the French philosophers, among those who has been the most ready to listen to continental philosophy, and who also fosters the most links of friendship and affection with a good number of continental philosophers." But her conclusion is definitive: "No reconciliation between the two seems possible for me, and all in all I often have the impression of having, quite simply, another profession. I quite often feel closer to the way a good number of my Peruvian, Taiwanese, or Greek analytic colleagues think and work than I am with some French 'philosophers'." (Online interview on the website www.mediapart.fr)

169. Nef (2004), p.743.

170. Roy (2010).

171. Mabile (2010).

172. Wolff (2007).

173. Cahiers de Royaumont (1962).

174. Unless considering a potential positive sense of philosophical syncretism, following Mulligan (1993): "'Syncretism,' in one of its senses, is a pejorative term. But, of course, the fact that a philosopher combines

two ideas or more, however distinct their provenance, is never by itself a bad thing. *It is completely unimportant where a good idea comes from.* Syncretic philosophy is bad philosophy only when it is combined with the illness I called underdetermination [of positions and problems]: in particular, it is only when the links between philosophemes from very different traditions or heterogeneous sources – e.g., topology and Freud – are not made out that we get the characteristically Continental variety of free association of ideas.” (p.136, our emphasis).

175. See for example McDaniel (2009), Eisenhardt (1990), D’Agostini (2002), and Rundle (2004).

176. Cf. Smith (1978).

177. By “ontological relativism”, we do not mean what this expression means in Quine, nor even in Putnam’s pluralism, but instead the attitude that transpires in certain works of “comparative metaphysics” or anthropological metaphysics.

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