

DISTINCTIO ET COMPOSITIO ESSENTIAE ET EXISTENTIAE
AS INTERPRETED BY MARTIN HEIDEGGER

1. MEDIEVAL DISCUSSION OF THE ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE

Diversum est esse et id quod est.

Boethius, *Quomodo substantiae in eo quod sint bonae sint...*

1.1. *Medieval Ontology and "The Basic Problems of Phenomenology"*

During the years subsequent to the publication of *Being and Time* Heidegger's project to restate explicitly the question of being, the question that "has been forgotten" and lost some of its power but has never ceased to be at work in the history of philosophy, becomes more and more clearly outlined. *How must philosophy question being? What does it mean to "ask in a primordial manner," to ask de profundis?* In the second half of the 20's Heidegger already has an answer: "Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible" (SZ 35). The reverse is true also: "with regard to its subject-matter, phenomenology is the science of the being of beings — ontology" (SZ 37). Being of beings, being of the entity insofar as it *differs* from the entity, this enigmatic difference of being (*esse*) and entity (*ens*) — such is, according to Heidegger, the main problem of phenomenology. In a series of lectures entitled precisely *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology (Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie)*, delivered at Marburg University in summer 1927, while pursuing his usual hermeneutical strategy, Heidegger tries to introduce his audience to phenomenological ontology (or ontology-as-phenomenology) by explaining phenomenologically several important statements, or "theses" concerning being (*Thesen über das Sein*), "which have been advocated in the course of Western philosophy since Antiquity" (GP 20). One of these statements requiring a phenomenological elucidation is "the thesis of medieval ontology (Scholasticism) which goes back to Aristotle [and asserts that] to the constitution of being of a being belong (a) whatness (*Wassein, essentia*), and (b) being-at-hand or extantness (*Vorhandensein, existentia*) (*ibid.*).

Francisco Suarez's XXXI *Metaphysical Disputation*,¹ included in his great treatise *Disputationes metaphysicae* and entitled "De essentia entis finiti ut tale est, et de illius esse, eorumque distinctione" ("On the essence of the finite entity as such and on its being, and on the distinction between them"), is dedicated precisely to this topic. It is therefore not surprising that Heidegger's attention focuses on this text, in which Suarez not only expounds his own views concerning the distinction and composition of *essence* and *existence* in created entities, but also analyses carefully the problem's history, the tradition of its solution and the arguments of his precursors.

1.2. *Essence, Existence and Ontological Difference*

Why does the "thesis of medieval metaphysics" mentioned above seem so important to Heidegger? Why is it designed to serve as an introduction to phenomenological ontology — i. e., to ontology as such?

In the Marburg lecture course of 1927 mentioned above the notion of *ontological difference* is discussed for the first time. The term itself refers to a concept basic to Heidegger's ontology — to the difference between entity and being. Language allows us at least to articulate this difference by means of different suffixes: *das Seiende* — *das Sein*,² and so to initiate our understanding of it — which, however, may later reveal itself as an illusion. For "we do not always [actually] possess," as Leibniz wrote, "the idea of the subject we are aware of thinking about."

Strictly speaking, the scholastic distinction between essence and existence does not coincide with the ontological difference, as Heidegger defines it. For even before any detailed analysis of these concepts one can say that existence, *existentia*, signifies *presence*,³ or as we can formulate it now, — the *energeia* of being-present, the actuality of an entity, i. e., it signifies "the way in which something actual or existent (*Existierendes*) is" (GP 109); whereas essence, *essentia*, refers to the *what-character* belonging to the ontological constitution of an entity, to its *being-something*, "somethingness" or "thingness" (*realitas*, *Realität*, *Sachheit*), understood as "whatness" (*quidditas*, *Washeit*). Thus, Heidegger says, the distinction between essence (reality) and existence belongs on the side of one member distinguished (or to be distinguished) in the ontological difference: "neither *realitas* nor *existentia* is an entity; rather it is precisely two of them that make up the structure of being. The distinction between *realitas* and *existentia* articulates being more particularly in its essential constitution" (GP 109). Therefore the "distinction and composition" of *essentia* and *existentia*, as the basic articulation of being, namely, each single entity's being, are rather one of the *moments* or ways of positing the ontological difference.

¹ F. Suarez, *Opera omnia*, ed. C. Berton, T. XXVI (Paris, 1861).

² It is the German language, of course, that allows Heidegger to express immediately the difference in question. We already referred to the difficulties one encounters while discussing the same topic in English.

³ *Presence* in the sense of *extantness*, *being-ready-to-hand*. In Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* the terms *Existenz* and *Dasein* are complete synonyms.

1.3. *Semantic Distinctions*

Our starting point must be the assumption that the ontological difference — whether it proves to be intelligible or unintelligible, actual or imaginary — is already implied and expressed in language, and for the time being the way it is expressed has to become the matter of our analysis.

First philosophy takes as its subject τὸ ὄν ἢ ὄν,⁴ i. e., entity insofar it is entity (*ens*, *in quantum ens*), entity as such. But what can we say about an entity, a being as such? We say, “a being (an entity) *is*.” The last sentence would be little more than a tautology if the meaning of its subject and predicate were equally clear to us. Nonetheless it is its being that defines the entity as such. Suarez writes:

the entity, insofar as it is entity, receives its name from being (*esse*) and because of being; in other words, it has the meaning of entity (*rationem entis*) because of its destination to be...⁵

Thus strictly speaking *ens = aliquid habens realem actum essendi*:⁶ the entity is something which “has” — that is, *accomplishes or performs*, — *the act of being*. Consequently, the main problem of first philosophy — τί τὸ ὄν; “what is entity?” — seems to be identical with the question: τί τὸ εἶναι; “what is being?” Yet if the word ὄν, *ens*, *entity* were capturing *only this meaning* of the participle, the meaning of participating in an act (action, actuality), i.e. of participating in being, the distinction we are interested in would be just a ghost, an unimportant difference between two ways of expressing the same content.

Those scholars who discussed the problem of *the distinction and composition of essence and existence in created entities*⁷ in the Middle Ages faced a similar difficulty. It was discovered that the possibility of stating the distinction or difference between *ens* and *esse* or (in another form) between *essentia* and *existentia* as a proper subject of inquiry (that is, according to Heidegger, the possibility of the *basic articulation of being*), is determined by the remarkable ambiguity of the little word ὄν, *ens*.⁸ While discussing, with the thoroughness peculiar to him, the concept of entity, *conceptus obiectivus entis*, Suarez says that the meaning of the word (*vocis*) *ens* is twofold.

1. As a participle of the verb *sum*, which means, taken absolutely (not as a copula), nothing else but the act of being, *actus essendi*, *ens* is to be understood as *that which is*. It follows that in this sense *entity* refers to being as an *act* only, no matter

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaph.* IV 1, 1003a21. The traditional Latin translation of this formula (which Suarez also refers to) is: *ens in quantum ens*.

⁵ F. Suarez, *Disputationes metaphysicae*, disp. XXXI, sect. I, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, disp. II, sect. IV, 4.

⁷ *Distinctio et compositio essentiae et existentiae in ente creato*.

⁸ This vocable was uttered first, as we know, by the goddess of Parmenides’ metaphysical revelation. The Stranger in Plato’s *Sophist* says to Theaetetus: “it seems to me that Parmenides and all those who ever undertook an attempt to take the beings (τὰ ὄντα) on trial... have talked to us rather carelessly. [...] Every one of them seems to tell us a story as if we were children. [...] Then since we are in perplexity, do you (sc. Parmenides and the other great thinkers of the past) tell us plainly what you wish to designate when you say ‘a being’ (τὸ ὄν). For it is clear that you have known this all along, whereas we formerly thought we knew, but are now perplexed” (242c–244a). These last words were chosen by Heidegger as epigraph to *Being and Time*.

what the entity is (*extra rerum quidditatem*), irrespective of its definition as a particular existing thing, having its definite what-character. A participle, formally connected with the grammatical category of tense, always *implies temporality* in its meaning (*tempus consignificat*). Therefore *ens* means a “being-now” or *actual exercising or accomplishing of being* (*actuale exercitium essendi seu existendi*). Due to this fact *ens*, taken as a participle, refers to existence of an entity irrespective of its “whatness.”

2. Yet *ens* can be used in another — in the *secondary*, as Suarez puts it, — sense, being taken as a *noun* [substantive], *vi nominis*. Then the term *ens* “has the power” to name a thing in its semantic delineation, in its whatness (*quidditas*), thought separately from the act of existence.

It seems that this semantic analysis already constitutes a certain progress towards distinguishing between essence and existence. Yet we meet with serious difficulty here. There is a difference, Suarez says, in the usage of the words *ens* and *res*, even if the former is taken as a noun. *Ens* does not signify an arbitrary, more or less vaguely represented, semantic construction; it refers *only* to something which has a “real essence” (*essentiam realem*). In other words, an essence “apt to exist in reality” (*essentiam veram et aptam ad realiter existendum*), an essence which may happen to exist, a “true” essence, not a “fictional or chimerical one” (*non fictam, nec chymericam*).⁹ So, even if the word *ens* is taken as a noun (*sumptum nominaliter*), its connection with the “verbal character” of being is not completely lost: *ens* always implies an ability, a readiness, an aptitude, a fitness to *be* actually (this *being* is expressed by the verb in present tense). The word “essence” (*essentia*) itself points, in a way, to the verb “to be” (*esse*). That is why, as Thomas Aquinas remarks, the concept of essence does not completely coincide with the concept of “whatness” (*quidditas*). “Whatness” is the content expressed in the definition, and the essence is so called because a thing has its being through it and in it (*per eam et in ea ens habet esse*).¹⁰ Yet if the definition is not an arbitrary invention of the mind immersed in unfounded semantic constructions, but actually shows and brings to light the essence of the entity, as it is “in the nature of things” (*in rerum natura*), then the border line between *ens* taken as a noun and *ens* taken as a participle gets blurred. The noun becomes not just a noun, but also a noun referring to and implicitly containing in itself the verb “is,” the aptitude to be.

Thus the “being-ness” (*entitas*) of a being (*ens*), if the latter is taken as a noun (*sumptum nominaliter*), means that the entity is comprehensible in a strong sense of the word: it is intelligible in perfect clarity, non-deceptive, free from illusions of language and imagination. Here the concept of *entitas* (“being-ness”) and that of *essentia realis, realitas*, reality are getting as close as possible.

Leibniz carried this point of view to its extreme:¹¹ he identified the entity (*ens*) and the possible (*possibile*). The entity is characterized as a conjunction (*conjunctio*)

⁹ Disp. II, sect. IV, 5.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, ed. 3 (Torino: Marietti, 1957), cap. I, sect. 2.

¹¹ The fact that Leibniz (as well as Descartes) was strongly influenced by Suarez’ *Disputationes* is well known and amply discussed by the historians of philosophy.

of simple and mutually independent qualities or distinctive marks (*notae*). One can speak of a *possibile*, when the combination of marks or constituents (*requisita*) within the same medium (i.e. their predication relating to the same subject) does not lead to a logical contradiction. In this way the law of contradiction becomes the umpire establishing the distinction between *essentia realis* and *essentia ficta seu chymica*.

Hegel seized on this incipient movement and developed it further in the *Phänomenologie der Geist*.¹² Here he still understands “thing-ness” or “pure essence” as a “medium,” in which, as in a kind of a simple unity, various simple qualities “penetrate each other without, however, coming into touch with one another or influencing each other in this mutual penetration.” A thing is *das Auch*, a mere conjunction (*conjunctio*) of mutually indifferent (and therefore obedient to the law of contradiction) qualities. Such is the replica of the scholastic concept of *essentia realis* in Hegel’s phenomenology.

1.4. *Essence, Whatness, Nature*

The *essentia realis* allows the form of a thing to be present in the “perceiving intellect” (*intellectus percipiens*). This permission-to-be-present is, to the Scholastics, an expression of the thing’s *nature*.¹³ According to the definition given by Thomas Aquinas, a thing reveals its nature in the way it influences other things: the nature structures actions or “operations” (*operationes*) of the entity and marks them as proper precisely to this thing (*propria*). One of these “proper operations” is, as was mentioned above, the permission to be present to the mind. A thing is revealed to the mind as a definite “what,” *quid*, as “whatness,” *quidditas*. Whatness is expressed in the definition and presupposes grasping of the proximate genus and the relevant specific difference. That is why the essence means something which is proper to any nature and through which various entities are distributed between various genera and species.¹⁴ So, the terms “form,” “whatness” and “nature” correspond to different closely related and yet non-identical meanings of “essence.” We see that even this preliminary analysis includes in its scope a certain system of ontological ideas. Essence (*that in which and through which the entity possesses being*, the core of the meaning of being) is thus very closely connected with the ability to be present to the mind as something definite and distinct. Being-ness implies as its counterpart a possibility of adequate, that is, thoroughly clear knowledge where confusion is no longer possible. Through its essence, the entity possesses a *definite being* (*esse quid*), a “being-something”; after Aristotle, essence is referred to as *quod quid erat esse, τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι*.

¹² See section II entitled “Die Wahrnehmung, das Ding und die Täuschung.”

¹³ This interpretation of the concept of *natura* can be traced back to Boethius. In the treatise entitled *Liber de persona et duabus naturis* Boethius says that in whatever sense one may understand a being (*ens*), it is due to the nature of this being that the intellect is capable to grasp it. Cf. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Ser. latina, t. 64, col. 1541B.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia* 12.