

Research Article

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Translating Epistemology into Ontology: Two Versions of an Argument

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Abstract: This paper reconstructs an argument about how epistemological principles can come to function as ontological commitments. The argument holds that, when an epistemological framework has universal scope and supplies the conditions under which anything enters the field of inquiry, the conditions it establishes amount to conditions of being. The paper traces this argument across the analytic-continental divide and suggests that what appears in each as a distinctive philosophical operation can be read as two versions of the same move. In the first part, I identify the argument as it emerges in phenomenological-hermeneutic readings of canonical texts of modern philosophy. In the second, I argue that the same argument is defended by Quine, though in a different key – openly affirmed rather than read out of texts as a diagnosis and held without recourse to a transcendental standpoint. I conclude that the argument is thus separable from the diagnosis use the first tradition puts it to, and that Quine’s ontological position is less deflationary than its standard reception has been willing to admit. Finally, I suggest that the ontological pluralism that follows from the argument is available in either idiom – without committing to the nostalgia of the one or the austerity of the other.

Keywords: ontology; epistemology; ontological commitment; ontological pluralism; Heidegger; Quine

1 Introduction

A man on a game show is asked to choose between a modest cash prize and whatever lies behind a curtain. He does not know what is there – a car, a refrigerator, a beach apartment; perhaps nothing at all. The question of what the hidden prize is, and the question of how he might find out, are clearly different questions. Suppose he hopes for a car. He might wonder what model it is, what colour, whether it’s new or used, whether it runs. Quite apart from that, he might also wonder whether the host’s smile gives anything away, whether the audience’s reaction was a hint, whether the curtain shows a telling bulge. Philosophers usually call the first sort of question ontological and the second epistemological: one concerns the world, the other our access to it. They are different, and in principle independent. The show, in fact, forces the contestant to set aside what exactly the prize is and content himself with what he can gather from his side of the curtain – which is very little: the show’s track record, how often the prizes are good, the odd faint clue.

Many modern philosophers, it seems, chose to stand where the contestant stands. Descartes, Locke, and Hume each, in their own way, propose to set aside the question of how things really are and turn instead to what, and within what limits, the human mind can know. There is, of course, nothing innocent about putting it this way: it is a barely veiled critique of philosophies that speak of substances, accidents, and causes without ever asking by what right. But the distinction itself looks innocent enough.

What happens, though, if the ontological question is deferred indefinitely – whether because one keeps refusing to raise it, or because one subordinates it entirely to the epistemological one? It would be as if the contestant, having picked the curtain, were told there was nothing behind it, and not allowed to check. He would

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have every right to walk away deeply unsatisfied. After all, what one knows ought to match what is. Why, then, did neither the philosophers who kept deferring this question – Kant included, who reformulated it until it became unrecognizable – nor those who were content to let it stay deferred ever walk away unsatisfied? One answer, and the one whose versions I want to examine here, is that epistemology, pressed far enough, does not leave ontology untouched but takes its place – that it is a kind of ontology, or at any rate can be translated into ontological terms. Those who insist on the distinction would, on this view, be taking two descriptions of the same philosophical move for two different inquiries. I shall call this the translation argument.

This paper does not set out to defend this argument.¹ Its aim is to reconstruct it across two markedly different philosophical idioms. More specifically, it examines the form the argument takes in Heidegger's and Marion's readings of modern philosophy and compares it with the explicitly naturalized position defended by Quine. What I want to show is that what appears in these traditions as two different philosophical operations is in fact structurally the same argument: under certain conditions, epistemological principles acquire ontological force. The argument, on this reading, proves relatively independent of the phenomenological or analytic vocabularies in which it appears, surviving a partial separation from its original context. If my reconstruction is done well, the two idioms should illuminate each other in ways that neither achieves alone.

2 The Ontological Reach of Method: Marion on Descartes

The most familiar version of this argument comes from the phenomenological tradition. Consider Descartes's *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. The book reads as a methodological treatise: a set of instructions for the conduct of inquiry, ambitious enough in scope – Descartes means them to serve for knowing anything whatsoever – but without obvious metaphysical pretensions. He is careful, in fact, to insist that he is not making any. Often enough, he tells the reader that he will not be concerned with how things are in themselves, only with how the intellect can reach them – *respectu intellectus nostri*, as the recurring formula goes. In Rule XII, he writes: “when we consider things in the order that corresponds to our knowledge of them, our view of them must be different from what it would be if we were speaking of them in accordance with how they exist in reality.”² Whatever the things are in themselves, the *Regulae* will leave that question alone.

Now, what an author says he is doing and what his text actually does are not always the same – and there is no particular reason why ontology should have to announce itself in the vocabulary traditionally reserved for it. This, at any rate, is the line taken in Jean-Luc Marion's *Descartes's Grey Ontology*.³ The *Regulae*, he argues, can be doing ontology while never using the word *being*, never reaching for traditional concepts, never leaving the epistemological register at all. The question, he says, is not whether Descartes means to make metaphysical claims in his text – he doesn't, and says as much – but whether the work he carries out under the name of method has metaphysical consequences he has not made explicit.

Marion's reading rests, in part, on a careful tracking of the vocabulary of Aristotelian first philosophy that Descartes displaces. This displacement is, for Marion, evidence that Descartes is operating on ontological terrain, since one does not bother to displace what one is not engaging with. But it is not the philological case I want to dwell on here. What interests me is the argument it supports: how ontology can be carried out under the name of method. To show that this is so, Marion's analysis turns on two things. The first is scope. The *Regulae* are not offered as a method for one science among others; they purport to be the form of any successful inquiry whatsoever. Whatever can be known at all is to be known in their light. That ambition matches, in extent, the old ambition of metaphysics – to speak about everything that there is. The second is that within this universal scope,

1 The argument is not without its attractions, and I do not approach it with indifference. I think it may prove useful, in particular, in debates about representationalism in the philosophy of the social sciences.

2 René Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule XII, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. I, trans. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 44. Latin text in *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. X, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Vrin, 1996), 418. The formula *respectu intellectus nostri* recurs through Rules VIII, XII, and XIII.

3 Jean-Luc Marion, *Descartes's Grey Ontology: Cartesian Science and Aristotelian Thought in the Regulae*, trans. Sarah E. Donahue (St. Augustine's Press, 2022).

Descartes introduces what looks like a restriction. Knowledge proper, he says in Rule III, is intuition: the intellect's immediate and indubitable grasp of something; but what the intellect can grasp in this way is only what admits of order and measure. Things, accordingly, are to be arranged not by genus or kind but by the series in which one can be known from another. Descartes thus makes two moves at once. Inquiry will reach to everything, but everything will be reached only insofar as it submits to order and measure. In this way, order and measure stop being the criteria proper to one region of knowledge, as quantity was for ancient mathematics; they become the conditions under which anything counts as knowable at all. And once the scope of inquiry is universal, Marion observes, the conditions of knowability double as conditions of what counts as real. What cannot be brought under order and measure cannot be known; what cannot be known plays no part in the inquiry; and the inquiry, as Descartes has set it up, is coextensive with the whole. Without any change in vocabulary, without any explicit metaphysical claim, the methodological decision to consider in each thing only what is governed by order and measure has fixed what can count as a being. To settle the conditions under which something can be legitimately affirmed amounts, in the end, to settling the conditions under which something is.

The argument can be put more plainly. Take a conceptual framework that has universal scope – everything is to be known in its terms – and that specifies the conditions under which something is taken up by the inquiry. Anything that enters the field of inquiry, then, does so as something already shaped by those conditions: not a thing made knowable, but an object whose being-an-object amounts to satisfying those very conditions. The framework does not approach a given domain and select within it what is knowable; it generates its own domain of what it can think. And since the framework is not embedded in any more comprehensive scheme, the domain it generates is the domain of what counts as anything at all. The equivalence follows: the conditions under which something becomes knowable are the conditions under which it counts as a being. To ask under what conditions a knowledge claim is legitimate is, accordingly, the only available form of the ontological question once the framework has been set up in this way.

Marion's account of this movement has a critical edge. Since in the *Regulae*, the replacement of an Aristotelian ontology by an ontology-through-epistemology is carried out rather than grounded, what Descartes still owes us, he argues, is an examination of the intellect on which everything has been made to rest, and a demonstration that its rules must be these and not others. Marion will read the *Meditations* as an attempt in that direction, and it is there, on the terrain of the meditating subject – terrain Descartes already shares with what we now call phenomenology – that he will locate the deficiencies of the whole operation. But that is a second step, and the matter of his later work.⁴ What concerns me here is that the equivalence between conditions of knowability and conditions of being can be recognized as such, whether or not it is well grounded. If anything, the *Regulae* operate as forcefully as they do precisely because they sidestep the question of foundation. This recognition is prior to, and independent of, whether the *Meditations* succeed in giving such an equivalence a foundation outside itself.

3 Objectivity as Ontology

This line of analysis did not begin with Marion. It comes from Heidegger's reading of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. That genealogy matters here for two reasons. The first is that the argument travels: it operates on Descartes, on Kant, and could plausibly be extended to other modern theories of knowledge. The second is more important. That Marion takes up an argument from Heidegger suggests that it can be sustained independently of the assessment one might wish to make of it – whether the operation it describes is a gain or a loss, a clarification or a mistake – and, at least in part, independently of the wider philosophy of the interpreter. One can grant that Heidegger is right to read the *Critique* as ontology without thereby being committed to the rest of his program: that the ontology in question is insufficiently radical, that it calls for an analytic of *Dasein*, that there is a forgetting

⁴ For Marion's reading of the *Meditations*, see *On Descartes' Metaphysical Prism*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

of being to be diagnosed, and so on. What I mean, more generally, is that recognizing the ontological dimension of a theory does not commit one to deciding what to do about it.

To summarize, perhaps too quickly, the core of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*: Heidegger reads the *Critique* as an attempt to ground metaphysics, not as a theory of how science gets the world right or how experience hangs together – which is what a certain reception had made of it. Kant himself gives little ground for the dispute.⁵ The *Critique*, he tells us, “is a treatise on the method, not a system of the science itself; but it catalogs the entire outline of the science of metaphysics, both in respect of its boundaries and in respect of its entire internal structure.”⁶ What Heidegger adds is that, since it is concerned in the first place with our *a priori* concepts of objects in general, this kind of inquiry cannot help being ontological. Like Descartes’s rules, those concepts establish what makes anything count as an object at all; they deliver the very objectivity of any object of experience whatsoever; and they therefore amount to an interpretation of being. The decisive moment, on Heidegger’s reading, is what Kant calls the supreme principle of all synthetic judgments – the claim that “the conditions of the possibility of experience in general are at the same time conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience” (A158/B197). Everything turns, according to Heidegger, on the *at the same time*. He takes it to express the equivalence I am tracking: the conditions under which something becomes knowable are the conditions under which it counts as a being. These are not two parallel structures aligned by some happy fact about the human mind, but a single one – the structure under which something can stand before us at all. What Kant means to show is that nothing can be given except as an object, and therefore that being is always being-an-object.

One might still try to think of that something – what falls under such conditions – independently of them. This is what Kant calls *noumenon*, and at first glance it looks like a return to the game show. The phenomenon would be everything the contestant takes for granted while the curtain is down; the noumenon, what is really behind it. But this is not a good analogy for the Kantian position. The game show works because the curtain can be drawn aside; only the rules prevent the contestant from stepping around it and checking. The phenomenon-noumenon distinction means that no such inspection is possible. When it comes to genuine cognition, there is no standpoint from which to do so; experience has no outside. Heidegger is right to say that, for Kant, the phenomenon is not the object as it shows up in our mind – the longed-for car of the contestant – but the object itself, given under the conditions of sensible intuition and the pure concepts of the understanding. As far as we know, there is no other knowledge of objects. Yet, as Kant writes, “even if we cannot cognize these *same objects as things in themselves*, we at least must be able to think them as things in themselves” (Bxxvi). The noumenon, then, is just the phenomenon, only considered apart from the conditions of objectivity. Not two entities, one accessible and one hidden, but one thought in two ways. Heidegger illustrates this by comparing the finite, receptive intuition – the only kind Kant analyses, which needs to be synthesized with the concepts of the understanding – with its alternative, intellectual intuition, which would know its object by producing it. The point is not to contrast two different objects, one accessible to us and another to a divine intellect, but to show that there will always be some kind of intuition. The noumenon is not another object, but the same object considered apart from the intellectual conditions under which it can be known. As a boundary concept, it serves to mark that anything is always given somehow, never apart from any condition at all.⁷ There is only one car: we can know it; we can try to imagine how a divine intelligence might know it; we can think of it as a matter of practical decision. The car considered apart from each of these ways of taking it up – and any others, if there were any – is the car as noumenon. But it cannot be given as such, only thought, since to be given is always to be given somehow.

“The proud name of ontology, which presumes to offer synthetic *a priori* cognition of things in general in a systematic doctrine . . . must give way to the modest one of a mere analytic of pure understanding” (A247/B303). On Heidegger’s reading, this is not a retreat from ontology, but a way of showing that the ontological enterprise only makes sense as analytic of the understanding. The name *ontology* is dropped because it suggests a kind of

5 Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft, 5th ed. (Indiana University Press, 1997). German original: *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Vittorio Klostermann, 1929).

6 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), Bxxii.

7 A point Heidegger does not press is the link between the noumenon and practical reason. Thinking the same thing apart from the conditions of theoretical cognition is, according to Kant, what allows us to take it up under the conditions of practical reason – not because practical reason gives us access to the thing in itself, but because the conditions it imposes on things are different ones.

cognition without conditions – which the *Critique* argues is not possible at all – but for that very reason, the conditions of cognition turn out to carry ontological weight: they establish what it is to count as an object, and therefore what it is to be anything at all.

It is worth stepping back to take stock of what Marion's and Heidegger's readings have established. The translation argument makes it possible to identify ontological commitments latent in epistemological texts. Setting aside the local hermeneutic detail of Descartes and Kant, what they are suggesting is that certain epistemological positions – those of these philosophers, but potentially also those of the mathematical sciences of nature, or even of modernity at large, as they read it – can be recast into ontological terms. Not because either of them is committed to a strong metaphysical identity between being and being-known, but because, as they see it, once such an epistemological framework is in place, the question of what there is has no other available form than the question of what can legitimately be affirmed. Both, however, formulate this argument indirectly, by reading it out of texts that do not state it as such.

What changes when this argument is made explicit? For Heidegger and Marion, what matters at first is that it allows epistemological positions to be compared and discussed alongside different ontologies – in this case, on the historical plane. The point makes sense: what Descartes and Kant take themselves to be offering is not one more ontology, but the best possible account of the conditions of knowledge meant to occupy the place of any ontology whatsoever. The argument shows that this is one legitimate possibility; it does not decide whether it counts as a refutation of all others. It simply amounts to acknowledging that there are different ways of posing ontological questions, and therefore different possible interpretations of what it means to be – interpretations that have not remained constant across the history of philosophy. In a second move, however, the phenomenological approach cancels this plurality. Not because Marion or Heidegger choose one ontology from among the historical options – though their preferences are not exactly secret – but because both seek to place themselves at a more originary perspective, from which this kind of ontological pluralism appears secondary, if not irrelevant.

4 The Ontological Reach of Conceptual Schemes

One might ask, however, what would remain of the argument if no such ulterior standpoint were sought. What would a philosophy that took the translation argument as its own position look like – not as a diagnosis of a stretch of philosophical history, but as a thesis to be defended on its own terms? Quine, on the reading I want to propose, does just this. His account of the relation between epistemology and ontology can be reconstructed as an avowed version of exactly this argument.

As far as epistemology alone is concerned, Quine's position parallels that of Descartes in the *Regulae*. It is true that Quine explicitly “repudiates the Cartesian dream of a foundation for scientific certainty firmer than scientific method itself”.⁸ That dream, however, as we have seen, belongs to a later stage in Descartes's thought and, more importantly, is pursued only when ontology-through-epistemology is already in place. For Quine, the principles of scientific method are explicitly not to be grounded by something more secure; they are part of what he calls our conceptual scheme.⁹ Refusing to ground them in any form of non-scientific knowledge, Quine can be seen as deliberately remaining at the level of the *Regulae*, declining to take the step to the *Meditations* – hence his

⁸ W. V. Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, rev. ed. (Harvard University Press, 1992), 19.

⁹ Quine's notion of conceptual scheme is not uncontroversial. As Xavier Sabatier notes, it is variously juxtaposed with the notions of world theory, system of the world, science, common sense, and language – the last culminating in the remark that “where I have spoken of a conceptual scheme I could have spoken of a language”, W. V. Quine, *Theories and Things* (Harvard University Press, 1981), 41; see Xavier Sabatier, “Rôle et légitimité de la notion de schème conceptuel dans le réalisme de Quine,” *Philosophia Scientiae* 13, no. 1 (2009). Davidson argued that the scheme/content dualism implicit in such uses is a “third dogma of empiricism” Quine failed to abandon, and that the plurality of schemes cannot be coherently conceived; see Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Clarendon Press, 1984). In what follows, I draw on those passages in which Quine himself uses the term more narrowly: as the relatively stable theoretical background of theories, itself part of the knowledge enterprise it underwrites and revisable along with it. This narrower use is not touched by Davidson's objection: what he challenges is the scheme/content dualism, not the claim that some portions of our theory are held more stable than others.

characteristic rejection of First Philosophy. Unlike Descartes, however, Quine can do so because he comes to hold that there is no candidate for a foundational standpoint from which the rules of inquiry might be vindicated: sense data are not given prior to theory; induction cannot be justified without circularity; and there is no clear criterion for distinguishing our knowledge of the principles of science – of the “thinking subject” – from our knowledge of the world.¹⁰ Without that further kind of knowledge, what remains is a single plane on which common sense, science, and philosophy form a continuum. Descartes’s insistence in the *Regulae* that there is only one human wisdom, the same in whatever matter it is exercised, finds its analogue in Quine’s gradualism. Knowing is taken up as a single enterprise that operates as such without waiting to be grounded.

That refusal to look for grounds, however, does not dissolve the question they were meant to answer: what guarantees that these are the principles of natural science, that these are the rules of scientific method, and not others? Quine’s answer is elegant. Nothing guarantees them in advance. The conceptual scheme of our inquiry is fixed and revised in the very development of knowledge – common-sense knowledge first, scientific knowledge afterwards. Even the most fundamental commitments of science – empiricism itself, the demand for evidence, the laws of logic – are revisable in principle. As Quine puts it, “even telepathy and clairvoyance are scientific options, however moribund. It would take some extraordinary evidence to enliven them, but, if that were to happen, then empiricism itself – the crowning norm, we saw, of naturalized epistemology – would go by the board.”¹¹ The rules of scientific inquiry are not given once and for all; they are part of the science, and so they are fallible and corrigible along with it.

In Descartes and Kant, it took an interpreter to show that committing to a theory of knowledge had ontological consequences. Quine says so himself. In “On What There Is”, he raises the question of what there is as inseparable from the question of what a theory commits us to.¹² Saying that something is, he argues, requires that it be identifiable as such; and identifying it requires knowing what properties it has, what relations it bears to other things, how it differs from them. Criteria of identity of this sort can only be supplied by a theory. The question, then, is not what there is *tout court* but what entities a given theory commits us to. Quine’s proposal is this: a theory is committed to those entities that its bound variables must range over for its claims to come out true. Epistemology carries ontological weight, to begin with, because every theory has commitments about what exists that can be examined: “we look to bound variables in connection with ontology not in order to know what there is, but in order to know what a given remark or doctrine, ours or someone else’s, says there is”.¹³ True enough; but acknowledging that any theory commits us to certain entities does not yet amount to taking a position on what kinds of things there are in the world. Being the value of a bound variable is, in itself, a formal criterion: it tells us how to read off a theory’s commitments, but it does not dictate what those commitments should be. It does not, for instance, decide whether a theory should quantify over physical objects, classes, numbers, or possibilities. To see how such commitments are settled, as he explains in “Ontological Relativity”,¹⁴ one need not step outside epistemology – one must simply look beyond any particular theory to the conceptual scheme within which theories are formulated.

Let me return, one last time, to the television contest. For Quine, this scene would certainly not be a good illustration of knowledge. Lifting the curtain is at best the beginning of a cognitive process, not the process itself.

¹⁰ On the theory-ladenness of evidence, see W. V. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed. (Harvard University Press, 1980b); on the circularity of any vindication of induction and the dissolution of the epistemic subject into an object of natural science, see ‘Epistemology Naturalized’ (1969a), 69–90, and ‘Natural Kinds’ (1969b), 114–38.

¹¹ Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, 21.

¹² The non-deflationary reading of Quine’s ontology has been defended before, most notably by Veatch, who argues that Quine is best understood as a transcendental philosopher in a broadly Kantian sense; see Henry B. Veatch, “Is Quine a Metaphysician?,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 31, no. 3 (1978): 406–30. My reading shares Veatch’s basic intuition – that Quine’s position carries genuine ontological weight – but does not share his Kantian framework. I accept that both Quine and transcendental philosophy determine what is real exclusively through knowledge, but I consider it essential for Quine’s approach that there be no rupture between the condition and the conditioned, which, by contrast, is unavoidable for Kantianism.

¹³ W. V. Quine, “On What There Is,” in *From a Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays*, 2nd ed. (Harvard University Press, 1980a), 15.

¹⁴ W. V. Quine, “Ontological Relativity,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (Columbia University Press, 1969c), 50.

The moment just before, when the contestant is about to lift the curtain and still knows nothing about the prize – that, by contrast, can be a good approximation to what it means to inhabit a conceptual scheme. Imagine the man is asked to examine his expectations. What kind of thing does he anticipate finding there? Not a ghost, not a number, not a mental state. But why not? Does he allow that the prize might be an abstract entity, a value, a promise, or only a physical object? How would he distinguish the prize from the rest of the set, from his own mental representation of it, from those of the others? What criteria of identity would he apply? The answers he gives – and he cannot help giving them – are his conceptual scheme in action. They are not hypotheses belonging to some theory about unseen prizes; they are prior to that. They are the background without which whatever lies behind the curtain could not count as anything at all for him once it is lifted.

That background might appear not to be a theory itself – and it is not, at least not in the ordinary sense, with its variables, hypotheses, and predictions. It is certainly something larger than that: their background, the framework of categories, the underlying logic, the criteria of identity, the principles of revision under which theories are built. But it is no less theoretical for it; it only appears so because these elements are more firmly settled than the theories built within it. Quine is clear about this. A scheme operates just as any theory does. It is subject to revision, though at a different pace and under different pressures than ordinary theories. And it is chosen, when it is chosen, by the same kind of considerations that govern the choice of any theory: simplicity, fecundity, scope, minimum mutilation of what we already accept. The game show scene admittedly suggests a separation between the conditions of knowledge and what is known that is perhaps too substantive, one that fits better with the Kantian distinction between empirical and transcendental knowledge. For Quine, as we have said, there is never a curtain; or there is one only in the thought experiment in which one tries to separate the theory from the framework that they are not currently questioning. Precisely because such a conceptual scheme cannot itself escape being theoretical, it also carries ontological commitments just as any theory does, only of greater scope. “Our acceptance of an ontology,” Quine writes, “is similar in principle to our acceptance of a scientific theory... Our ontology is determined once we have fixed upon the over-all conceptual scheme which is to accommodate science in the broadest sense”.¹⁵ Ontology, in other words, is to the conceptual scheme what existential commitments are to any particular theory. It is what the scheme is committed to, read off in the same way one reads commitments off a theory.

The translation argument can now be reconstructed in Quine’s own terms. We start from a framework with universal scope: there is no outside to the conceptual scheme, because it is not over and above its theories; it is just the relatively stable core within them, everything theories themselves do not put into question. And we have no access to things except through what some theory posits. Theories posit what falls within their ken, and they do so in accordance with the scheme. Our access to what is to be known is therefore scheme-mediated all the way down. From these two premises, the temptation might be to conclude what theories posit is not necessarily real. But this cannot be applied selectively. As Quine observes, “in whatever sense the molecules in my desk are unreal and a figment of the imagination of the scientist, in that sense the desk itself is unreal and a figment of the imagination of the race”.¹⁶ Each is a posit of some theory, introduced to organize experience into stable, reidentifiable units. And the same applies to whatever might be thought to lie outside the scheme and constrain it from there. The sensory stimulations, the surfaces, the evidence itself – all that a naturalist might be inclined to treat as the pre-theoretical anchor of the whole edifice – are themselves described from within the very theory they are supposed to anchor. There is no rung at which posits stop and reality begins. As Quine writes elsewhere: “everything to which we concede existence is a posit from the standpoint of a description of the theory-building process, and simultaneously real from the standpoint of the theory that is being built”.¹⁷ Quine’s conclusion is not scepticism though. It is a reinterpretation of reality itself. The mistake, he suggests, was to expect evidence for ordinary bodies of a kind different from what makes the molecular doctrine compelling: “having noted that man has no evidence for the existence of bodies beyond the fact that their assumption helps him organize experience, we should have done well, instead of disclaiming evidence for the existence of bodies, to conclude: such, then, at

¹⁵ Quine, “On What There Is,” 16–17.

¹⁶ W. V. Quine, “Posits and Reality,” in *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, rev. ed. (Harvard University Press, 1976), 237.

¹⁷ W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (MIT Press, 1960), 22.

bottom, is what evidence is, both for ordinary bodies and for molecules”.¹⁸ Reality is not what stands behind the posits, but the posits themselves, taken under the conditions in which such evidence is the only kind of evidence there can be. And since all positing is done in accordance with the scheme, its logic, its criteria of identity, its divisions between kinds of thing are not merely epistemic choices – they are simultaneously ontological commitments.

5 Ontological Pluralism, History and Provinciality

Ontological matters, the Heideggerian approach to the history of philosophy maintains, are addressed differently at different historical moments. Modern philosophy did not abandon the question of being; it asked it with the means at hand – which is to say, by way of epistemology. And this is not a neutral choice. It rules out certain interpretations of being and favours others. From the phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective, this is to be looked at with suspicion: a development whose historical sources need to be uncovered, and whose long-term effects on metaphysics remain to be assessed. The Quine I have been reconstructing does not stand where one might expect here. He does not, like Carnap in the *Aufbau*, deny that metaphysical questions have any sense at all. He claims rather that they have sense only insofar as they are tied to the question of what our best theories of the world commit us to. This rules out a great deal – any appeal to a being independent of our cognitive practices – and amounts, in effect, to a reinterpretation of what it means to be: to be is to meet the most stable commitments of our best theories.

Quine’s version of the translation argument has at least two virtues, even by phenomenological lights. The first is almost trivial now. Quine is explicit about the ontological reach of his position and spells it out in fairly plain terms. There is then no concealed ontological move that an interpreter must come along and unmask. The position presents itself openly as an ontological option – polemical and far from innocent. The second is perhaps less evident. The phenomenological version of the argument carried an opening towards other interpretations of being. Modern philosophy seemed to reject ontology in its classical form and to present the principles of method or knowledge as universally valid. Reading that move as a historical option was a way of relativizing it against other possible ontologies. What becomes of this opening in Quine?

It must be admitted that Quine takes little interest in the historical dimension of science – in how its conceptual scheme has shifted over time, let alone in its encounters with schemes of independent genealogy, the kind that have operated, or still do, in other cultures. The reason, I think, is twofold. He is convinced, in the first place, that science today is the best way of explaining the world. Hence the principal error of philosophy seems to him to be precisely to imagine a mode of knowledge discontinuous with science. And in the second place, generalizing, he seems to think that we can always work out which framework is better, and that no rational option is open but to prefer it. That the history of humanity has been punctuated by deep challenges to and transformations of the prevailing scheme is, on this view, secondary to the fact that in each case it has been possible to find a way through.

None of this is incompatible, however, with thinking that the scheme itself may have undergone deep shifts over time, and that in other cultures – those, say, in which natural science has not developed – the scheme is a very different one. Quine seems to recognize as much. Sometimes he even grants that the translation of distant schemes into ours – past, future, or alien – is not guaranteed.¹⁹ This, to my mind, entails a kind of ontological pluralism. If ontology depends on the conceptual scheme, and schemes vary – in time and across cultures – then there is a plurality of ontologies, understood as distinct sets of commitments, in principle comparable, with no unique translation between them. This parallels the opening towards other interpretations of being that phenomenology located in the historical plurality of ontologies, though in a different idiom – not as the recovery of forgotten ways of being, but as the recognition that, in Quine’s own phrase, “our current Western conceptual scheme” is one provincial option among the empirically admissible ones. Quine himself does not pursue this

¹⁸ Quine, “Posits and Reality,” 238.

¹⁹ W. V. Quine, “Speaking of Objects,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (Columbia University Press, 1969d), 25.

consequence; he is not in the business of reconstructing past ontologies or recovering alien ones. But he does not exclude it either, and he is unusually candid about the position from which he writes: “I philosophize from the vantage point only of our own provincial conceptual scheme and scientific epoch, true; but I know no better” (*ibid*). This remark grants exactly what the phenomenological tradition has insisted on – that there is no neutral standpoint from which metaphysical questions can be raised – while declining to do anything further with the concession. He makes no leap to a more originary perspective and diagnoses no forgetting. The vantage is provincial; for Quine, that is just what it is to have a vantage at all.

An objection from the phenomenological side might be raised at this point. I have reconstructed Quine’s ontological position along pluralist lines that could accommodate the Heideggerian intuition about the epochs of being. Distinct conceptual schemes carry distinct ontological commitments; what varies between them is not only their inventory but how they determine what counts as a thing – the criteria of identity, the conditions of individuation, the kind of unity or presence that is recognized as real. Granting, for the sake of argument, that the phenomenological approach to the history of philosophy is correct, my interpretation suggests that the plurality of modes of being it locates in that history²⁰ can be understood as a plurality of conceptual schemes.

Does this sit well with Quine’s univocism? It would seem not. To be, for Quine, means one thing only: to fall within the range of the existential quantifier. To be is to be the value of a bound variable. No multiplication of schemes can alter the formal sense of that claim. The only way to accommodate ontological plurality – and the one my interpretation is accordingly committed to – is that, precisely because of the formal and empty character of the quantifier, the content of any ontological commitment is supplied by the unquestioned background of our best theories in each context.²¹ No more than this does the translation argument entail. But if this is the only available form, then the plurality of senses of being that phenomenological readers find across the epochs of its history – construed as a plurality of schemes – would have to be accommodated within that univocism.

For my part, I see no obstacle to ontological commitments varying as radically as those senses of being are said to do across history. But I understand it is troubling from the phenomenological point of view. Quine’s plurality, however genuine – the objection would go – cannot really capture the one a careful reading finds running through the history of being. To suggest that the epochal interpretations of being can be read as substantively distinct ontological commitments housed under a common logical form would betray what Heidegger’s or Marion’s readings are meant to show: that the meaning of being varies historically in ways irreducible to any common logical form. The very distinction between neutral logical form and variable substantive content would itself be a modern metaphysical decision, on their view. It presupposes that there is one true form of being – the quantificational one – and that the others are historical variants of its content.

A full response would take me too far afield, but the direction it would take can be sketched. The trouble the objection raises is not, it seems to me, specific to Quine. It bears on the status of philosophical discourse about being as such. It is no less a difficulty for Heidegger and Marion themselves. The very claim that *ousia*, *creatura*, and *Gegenstand* are senses of being already subsumes them under some unifying notion, however imprecise. One cannot identify them as distinct senses of being without assuming something like a common logical form. The charge that Quine’s translation imposes a decision on the plurality cuts against any philosophical articulation of that plurality, not just his.

What I mean by this is simply that what distinguishes the two positions is not whether they organize ontological plurality in some determinate way – both must – but how they handle the fact that they do. Quine’s strategy is deflationary. His instrument is the existential quantifier, and its virtue, for this purpose, is precisely

²⁰ For example, Greek *ousia* as substance under Aristotelian criteria of individuation; the medieval creature as a being with ontological dependence on a creator; the modern object as a unit of reference under spatio-temporal conditions of identity.

²¹ I consider my reading of Quine to be compatible with the first three of Van Inwagen’s meta-ontological theses and with the fourth only formally. For him, the quantifier exhausts everything there is to say about being; any attempt to speak of ontological plurality beyond the inventory of what exists is, in his view, a confusion; see Peter van Inwagen, “Being, Existence, and Ontological Commitment,” in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David Chalmers et al. (Oxford University Press, 2009). I agree that the quantifier is univocal and formally adequate to capture the form of any ontological commitment, but I would argue that this formality does not exhaust the ontological question: in any actual use, the content of what counts as an entity, under what criteria of identity, is supplied by the substantive conceptual scheme within which quantification takes place.

that it is formal and empty: it fixes the form of any ontological commitment without prejudging its content. What counts as a being, under what criteria, is left to be supplied, in each case, by the conceptual scheme in play. The instrument is explicit, and Quine owns up to it as an instrument: he knows he is quantifying; he knows what quantifying commits him to, and he accepts whatever that turns out to be. Heidegger's strategy is something else: his instrument is hermeneutic interpretation, and what he finds with it is a plurality of historical interpretations of being, each of which proves, in its turn, inadequate to being as such. Being is thereby held in view as a horizon no articulation can reach. But this dissatisfaction with every articulation is, on closer inspection, just the other face of the provincialism Quine acknowledges flatly. Any articulation, speaking from somewhere, fails to reach being as such; one can either acknowledge the limit and proceed, as Quine does, or take it as a permanent occasion for pointing past every articulation in turn. From this angle, the phenomenological objection demands of Quine a fidelity to the heterogeneity of being that phenomenological discourse itself cannot deliver.

6 Conclusions

The argument I have reconstructed has it that, under certain conditions, the classical opposition between epistemology and ontology gives way. When epistemological principles have universal scope and supply the conditions under which anything enters the field of inquiry, they amount to ontological commitments. I have located this argument in the readings Heidegger and Marion give of modern philosophers, and in the position that Quine defends across some of his best-known essays.

That the argument can be formulated in both idioms carries two consequences. First, the argument is not in itself a diagnosis of modern philosophy of the sort that phenomenological hermeneutics performs with it. It can be held without subscribing to any particular interpretation of the history of philosophy. Second, Quine's naturalism can be read as carrying ontological commitments stronger than a part of its reception has tended to acknowledge. The most concrete payoff of the comparison is that ontological pluralism can be defended from either idiom, without having to accept any of the stronger substantive commitments characteristic of either position. One need not to become a strict naturalist or subscribe to the account of the forgetting of being in order to recognize that access to the world is always mediated by a scheme one has not chosen, and that other schemes – past, future, or alien – would carry different ontological commitments.

Two tasks remain for further consideration. First, adequately addressing the Heideggerian counter-objection raised above would require determining whether the formality of the quantifier admits an interpretation that does not amount to a metaphysical position. This remains to be done. Second, the translation argument developed here may prove fruitful in several strands of recent philosophy, particularly in discussions where epistemological approaches are deemed insufficient to achieve genuine ontological scope, as well as in current debates on realism and anti-representationalism. Whether this and other applications hold up is a matter for further work.

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