



INTERVIEW: ONTOFORMAT

Classical Paradigms and Theoretical Foundations in Contemporary Research in Formal and Material Ontology

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INTRODUCTION. OntoFormat is a research project that involves the Università degli Studi di Milano, the Università degli Studi di Perugia and the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan and the goal of which is to contribute in an original way to the current debate in Ontology. The project has been funded by Futuro in Ricerca, a programme of the Italian Ministry of Education and Research, that aims to encourage a generational change in Italian universities and public research institutions through the funding of projects directed and executed by young researchers. The idea is to promote research among under-forties academics in order to enable a more effective and active contribution to the European research reality.

OntoForMat pursues this aim through the work of ten young researchers of three important Italian universities. The idea is to develop a synoptic overview of the different issues, theories and positions in Ontology, thereby promoting a theoretical advancement of the discipline. The three research units, connected to the three universities, are coordinated by Professor Paolo Valore for the Università degli Studi di Milano, Professor Francesco Calemi for the Università degli Studi di Perugia, and Professor Lorenzo Fossati for the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. Researchers *Ciro De Florio*, *Aldo Frigerio*, *Alessandro Giordani*, *Paolo Gomasasca* and *Antonio Allegra* and post-doc researchers *Giuliana Mancuso* and *Daria Mignardo* are also involved in the project.

OntoForMat develops a “geography of theories” cataloguing the different theoretical positions in the debate, relating them with one another and confronting them to elaborate a general and complete overview that clearly shows their connections and mutual influence. The research is articulated on three distinct levels: meta-ontology, formal ontology and material ontology.

Seven theoretical cruxes have also been fixed in this threefold perspective: individuals and properties, states of affairs, modality and possible worlds, events and causality, mathematical objects, moral objects and meta-ontology.

In the project, the key positions (e.g. realism, nominalism, constructivism, logical atomism and so on) related to the great debates in Ontology are defined and presented by the members of the team. What makes this project peculiar, however, is the approach that characterises the analysis. By dealing with the problem of individuals and properties, for example, the researchers' aim will be to evaluate the different theoretical contributions by the perspective of formal Ontology in its entirety. It is furthermore assumed that a proposal in formal Ontology has to be necessarily related to the specific domains of material ontologies: as a consequence, the various proposals have to be tested in object contexts. At the same time, the analysis of the problem of states of affairs will be seen as a central focus of the study of the two approaches that characterise the debate: on the one hand, the early Husserl's phenomenological approach that characterises Meinong as well as Reinach's analysis as well, and on the other hand Russell and Wittgenstein's logical atomism. The goal will be to overcome the dichotomy between the two perspectives, enabling their interaction in order to trace new possible solutions.

As far as modality is concerned, realist positions, modal realist positions and anti-realist ones will be dealt with only after the elaboration of a unified modal semantics: this will allow a confrontation between the different views, which is often made difficult by the creation of specific different formal systems by individual authors. The same principle of simplification and creation of a unified and comprehensive perspective will be applied to the problem of causality, with the use of unified methodology on the grounds of the work by Pearl, Halpern and Hitchcock: the first step will be a systematisation of the principal theoretical proposals in the current debate. A further goal will also be an homogeneous description of the different causal deterministic models. At the same time, the Ontology research of mathematical objects will trace the principal positions in the debate and their background assumptions and, at a later stage, it will frame mathematical ontology in a broader context.

The meta-ethics investigation of moral objects will focus on an evaluation of advantages and disadvantages of the main positions (realist and anti-realist) and a clarification of the classic models. Moreover, the possibility of an epistemology of moral knowledge will be considered.

Finally, a critical, synthetic overview of the meta-ontology debate will be formulated, with particular attention to the contrast between foundationalism and quantificationism and a careful study of their historical and theoretical origins.

As a general approach, then, the project is overall oriented towards an identification of the theoretical foundations of the debate and the analytical reconstruction of the positions in the seven different topics. The expected results will include a clarification of the consistency relations between the various theories, of their theoretical assumptions and their justifications and the proposal of new perspectives consequent upon the analysis.

RIFAJ interviewed the national project coordinator Paolo Valore about the prerogatives and the aims of this remarkable project, which involves researchers in Logics, Meta-ethics, Philosophy of Science, Metaphysics, Ontology, Philosophy of Language, Theology and History of Philosophy. The substance of this interview is

reproduced below:

The idea of the project is to identify the classical paradigms and theoretical foundations in Ontology, with the background assumption that the debate needs a synoptic system that incorporates the different positions by showing their relations and mutual influences. In the second part of the twentieth century, a renewed interest in philosophical ontology arose; as a consequence, the debate is currently rich and diverse, with a great proliferation of positions and contributions. Clearly, then, the idea of the project is not merely to “complete” the debate, but to accomplish a theoretical operation. A certain tendency towards specialisation has characterised the evolution of the current philosophical debate: this has led to a great variety of localised works regarding very specific problems related to extremely circumscribed issues. This is obviously a necessary consequence of the increasing width of the research field and of the quantity of notions that are necessary for the work. However, this has led to a fragmentation of the debate; if, on the one hand, to circumscribe the analysis is a symptom of the competence of the researchers, on the other hand it is important to ask ourselves whether a view of the work from a comprehensive perspective is needed. While outlining the project, the background question we wanted to find an answer to was “How, with our competences and academic formation, can we contribute to the general debate?” The answer is that we can undertake an operation that is not proposing an alternative solution to a determinate, specific problem, but something that is at the same time more ambitious and less ambitious: we can modify the perspective on the already existing material. By aiming to recreate a general overview connecting the current positions and integrating the ones that have been ignored in the evolution of philosophical thought, our goal is to produce a tangible theoretical contribution. This undertaking requires, among the other things, to understand whether conclusions reached in a particular domain or theoretical operation can be applied to other sub-domains and issues.

There are two problems that can be highlighted in the current debate. Firstly, “metaphysical duplicities” are often found, e.g. a theory that combines universals in mathematical ontology and the tropes theory in concrete entities ontology does not adequately specify and defend its assumptions. In these cases it is pertinent to ask ourselves how the two positions can be compatible and how we can connect solutions that are reached and proved in different research domains.

Secondly, historical positions have been often taken into consideration often in a impressionistic way: it is our belief that a deeper awareness and a more systematic approach to past debates would be extremely useful to the current research. An obvious example is the medieval debate about universals: this meaningful dispute should probably be considered more than it actually is, and not only with a historical interest but also with a theoretical one. This is just an example of how to identify classical paradigms means also considering arguments and this, according to our vision, is a necessity of the debate. Another meaningful and illustrative example is mereology, where Aristotelian arguments are often considered.

As already said, moreover, many positions are not represented in the current debate mainly because of historical contingencies that do not undermine their theoretical value. Ernst Cassirer, for example, is highly regarded in the international debate; however, many authors of the Baden School are not even considered. Yet this partially depends on the fact that they have never written in English. On the contrary, Cassirer, who had to move to the United States due to the war, published several works in English that were largely appreci-

ated. It is clear that, in these cases, contingencies and, most importantly, the importance of the language of the international debate strongly influences the content of the debate itself. These dynamics are understandable: however, they threaten to damage the richness and the quality of the discussion. Something similar can be said, from my point of view, about the distinction between analytical and continental philosophy: when it is considered a methodological distinction, regarding analytical philosophy as a choice in favour of the rigorous use of rational arguments, it has a determinate value. However, when, as it is often the case, it simply leads to the disregard of certain authors that cannot be defined analytical in a narrower sense, it is dangerous for the debate: it can lead to erroneous evaluations and it can undermine the completeness of the analysis.

These are the reasons why we think that our knowledge and skills as Italian researchers can be decisive in offering an active contribute in this undertaking, that is both historical and theoretical.

Another central topic of the project is the idea that we can trace paradigms that allow a dialogue between researchers of different fields: it is not possible that conclusions reached by a logician are useful for a meta-ethics researcher as well? This idea is reflected by the structure of the project itself, as it includes people with very diverse competences who contribute and collaborate in order to reach the same objective. Even though the work necessarily proceeds through an internal division, the idea is to reconcile every piece of work in the final stage.

We think that it is possible to clarify, through our work, the relations between the different research fields. That is also the reason why we started by identifying the seven topics: individuals and properties, states of affairs, modality, events and causality, mathematical objects, moral objects, meta-ontology. We presuppose that the common goal is make the current debate as understandable and clear as possible, making it richer at the same time once the connections between the different issues are explored and clarified.

Among the results of the project, there will be volumes dedicated to a single topic (e.g. state of affairs) written by different academics, such as an epistemologist and a historian of philosophy. Following the same idea, we wanted our seminars to be open to public and our results to be shared online on our website; we believe that results have to be easily accessible for as many researchers as possible in order to actually contribute to the debate.

Given all these prerogatives, the challenge for OntoForMat is to create the possibility of presenting Ontology as a cohesive discipline that allows the union of different philosophical competences and experiences through a common language. We hope that, casting new light on the relations between relevant positions in the debate and providing a complete and deepened overview, theoretical advancements will be made.

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