

Metadata of the chapter that will be visualized online

Book Title	Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy	
Copyright Year	2010	
Copyright Holder	Springer-Verlag	
Chapter Title	Being	
Author	Family Name	Klima
	Particle	
	Given Name	Gyula
	Suffix	
	Division	Department of Philosophy
	Organization	Fordham University
	Address	New York, NY, 10458, USA
	Email	

B

Being

GYULA KLIMA
Department of Philosophy
Fordham University
New York, NY 10458
USA

Abstract

The notion of being is the most fundamental notion in medieval metaphysics, but in some ways also in medieval theology, logic and epistemology. Given its centrality, it would be impossible to provide here even a sketchy historical survey of the variety of ways in which medieval authors handled this notion. Therefore, this article will rather survey those paradigmatic characteristics of the medieval notion that make it most difficult for contemporary philosophers to approach it.

The Semantics of *Ens, Esse, and Est*

According to medieval philosophers, the notion of being is simple, indefinable, and in some sense precedes all other concepts we have. This, however, does not mean that it cannot be clarified. For instance, the notion of propositional conjunction is also simple and thus indefinable in terms of other, simpler concepts. Still, the notion can be clarified by describing the semantic function of the word expressing it in the following manner: the word “and” in English has the function of joining two propositional clauses in such a way that the conjunctive proposition expressed by the resulting compound sentence is true if and only if both propositions expressed by the clauses of the compound sentence are true. Likewise, we may provide a similar clarification of the notion of being through first characterizing the semantic functions of the words expressing it as these functions were typically conceived by medieval philosophers.

The English word “being” translates both the present tense active participle form “ens” and the infinitive form “esse” of the Latin verb “est,” corresponding to the English verb “is.” Just like the English verb, the Latin verb

functions both as a copula, joining subject and predicate into a proposition, and as an absolute verb, asserting the existence of the thing referred to by the subject.

Influenced by the post-Kantian/Fregean mantra according to which “existence is not a predicate,” many contemporary philosophers might be inclined to part company with their medieval colleagues already at this point. However, this oft-quoted slogan in the sense in which it is trivially true is simply irrelevant, whereas in the sense in which it is clearly relevant, it is simply false. For, in the sense in which it expresses the claim that the verb “be” and its cognates (including “exists” and its derivatives) used in the sense in which they express a Fregean second order concept (a concept that operates on other concepts) do not express a first order concept (a concept true of things), the slogan is trivially true. But in that sense it is irrelevant, as it says nothing about how medieval philosophers could or could not use the verb “est” and its cognates (cf. Klima 2004). However, in the sense in which the slogan would claim that medieval philosophers could not have possibly used “est” and its cognates as a predicate, the slogan, though clearly relevant, is simply false, for our medieval colleagues just did use them as such. Indeed, they did so consistently, and reflectively, within the framework of some truly intriguing semantic considerations.

One question that immediately crops up if one reflects on the syntactic role of “est” both as a copula (*esse tertium adiacens*) and as an absolute predicate (*esse secundum adiacens*) is whether it is a mere coincidence that it is the verb expressing existence that is used in both roles, both to copulate subject and predicate (to distinguish the resulting proposition from a mere list of names) and to predicate the actual existence of something. The question was already systematically considered by Abelard, who deployed an impressive array of arguments concerning the issue. However, his preferred theory, which would provide a noun-phrase/verb-phrase analysis of all categorical propositions (and thus would accord the copula the function of merely turning a nominal predicate term into a verb phrase), did not catch on, and did not have followers in the thirteenth century (cf. Jacobi 1986; King 2008).

The typical thirteenth century analysis followed Aristotle's considerations, not only in the *Peri Hermeneias* known to Abelard, but also in Aristotle's later recovered works, especially the two *Analytics* and the *Metaphysics*, along with Avicenna's and Averroes's immensely influential interpretations of Aristotle's doctrine. These considerations suggested both that the copula is essential in all predications for joining two noun-phrases in a proposition (thus, even a verb is supposed to contain an implicit copula, and so is to be analyzed into a copula-plus-participle construction, such as "A man runs" = "A man is running") and that the sense of the verb "est" even in its copulative function is somehow related to or is even derivable from its existential sense. The idea is neatly expressed by Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on Aristotle's *Peri Hermeneias*:

- ▶ The reason why [Aristotle] says that the verb 'is' co-signifies composition is that it does not principally signify composition, but secondarily; for it primarily signifies what occurs to the mind in the way of actuality absolutely: for 'is', uttered absolutely, signifies being in act, and hence it signifies as a verb. However, since actuality, which the verb 'is' principally signifies, is in general the actuality of every form (whether it is a substantial or an accidental actuality), when we want to signify any form or act to actually inhere [*in esse*] in a subject, we signify this by means of the verb 'is', either absolutely [*simpliciter*] or with some qualification [*secundum quid*]. . . (*In Perihermeneias* lb. 1, lc. 5, n. 22)

So, on Aquinas's view, the verb "est" primarily signifies an act of being (*esse* or *actus essendi*) of that to which it is attributed (whether it is its substantial act, as in "Socrates is" or "Socrates is a man", or some accidental act, as in "Socrates is wise" or "Socrates is tall"), and only secondarily signifies the composition of subject and predicate. Taking the verb "est" to signify an act of being (*esse*) is based on an analogy with any other verb that signifies some act, just as the verb "currit" ("runs") signifies an act of running (*currere*) (cf. *In De Hebdomadibus* lc. 2, n. 22). Thus, when "est" is used as an absolute predicate, when it is to be analyzed into copula and participle just as any other verb, as in "x est" = "x est ens", then "est" signifies the substantial act of being of x (as does the nominal predicate "ens"), and it is the actuality of this act of being that verifies the predication. However, when "est" is construed with another predicate as the copula, as in "x est N", where "N" is some noun-phrase, then it still primarily signifies existence, although in a sense somehow modified by the content of the predicate, which signifies a form of the subject. In that case, the act of being signified by "est" is the act of being of the form signified by the

predicate, which is the substantial act of being of the subject, provided the form signified by the predicate is the substantial form of the subject, or an accidental act of being of the subject, if the form signified by the predicate is an accidental form (cf. Klima 2002a).

From Semantics to Metaphysics

We can have a better understanding of this somewhat obscure point, if we consider how Aquinas conceives of the modifications of the sense of "is" imposed on it by different predicates in different categories, relating his theory of the copula to his conception of *the analogy of being*, the semantic theory that the term "ens" is neither univocal, nor equivocal, but analogical, because it applies to several things of different kinds neither in exactly the same sense (as the term "animal" applies to cats and mice), nor in utterly diverse, unrelated senses (as the word "bat" applies to flying mammals and baseball bats), but in different, yet related senses (as the word "sees" applies to the eye and to the mind). Thus, according to Aquinas, beings (*entia*) come in different varieties, expressed by the different, yet related senses of the verb "est", signifying the different ways in which these things are, on account of having their characteristic way or mode of being (*modus essendi*) (cf. Klima 2002b).

In his commentary on the *Metaphysics*, Aquinas writes:

- ▶ being cannot be narrowed down to something definite in the way in which a genus is narrowed down to a species by means of differences. [. . .] Being must then be narrowed down to diverse genera on the basis of a different mode of predication, which flows from a different mode of being; for 'being [*esse*] is signified,' i.e., something is signified to be, 'in just as many ways as something is said to be a being,' that is, in as many ways as something is predicated. And for this reason the first divisions of being are called predicaments [i.e., categories], because they are distinguished on the basis of different ways of predicating. Therefore, since some predicates signify *what* [something is], i.e., substance; others *of what kind* [something is, i.e., quality]; and yet others *how much* [something is, i.e., quantity]; and so on; it is necessary that for each mode of predication, being should signify the same [mode of being]. For example, when it is said that a man is an animal, 'is' signifies [the mode of being of] substance; and when it is said that a man is white, 'is' signifies [the mode of being of] quality; and so on (*In Metaphysicam* lb. 5, lc. 9, n. 5).

The main point of this passage is that the division of being into the categories is not like the division of a genus into

its species by means of specific differences, which is the division of a univocal term. This point is made even more explicit in the following passage:

- ▶ There are two ways in which something common can be divided into those that are under it, just as there are two ways in which something is common. There is the division of a univocal [term] into its species by differences by which the nature of the genus is equally participated in the species, as *animal* is divided into *man* and *horse*, and the like. Another division is that of something common by analogy, which is predicated according to its perfect concept [*ratio*] of one of those that divide it, and of the other [s] imperfectly and with qualification [*secundum quid*], as being is divided into substance and accident, and into being in actuality and in potentiality, and this sort of division is, as it were, midway between [the division of something] equivocal and [something] univocal (*In Secundum Sententiarum* d. 42, q. 1, a. 3).

So, Aquinas' idea seems to be the following. Every predication we make is a predication of being, but, depending on the predicate we use, it is a predication of being with some qualification or other. Thus, for instance, when I say "Tom is a cat" or "Jerry is a mouse", these predications assert the being of Tom cat-wise and the being of Jerry mouse-wise, respectively. This is because what the predicates of these predications signify are the respective essences of Tom and Jerry, which determine their modes of being, namely, cat-life and mouse-life, respectively. But as the above-quoted passage from the *Commentary on the Metaphysics* indicates, this idea is extended to all categories, including all nine categories of accidents. Indeed, the idea is further extended to all predicates, which may not even signify accidental forms, such as privative predicates, which signify rather the lack of such forms, and relational predicates that do not signify real inherent relations of things, but rather mere relations of reason. Such *significata* of predicable terms, then, were regarded by Aquinas (and practically everyone else working in the same semantic framework) as specifying the mode of being of an altogether different realm of entities, whose being consists in their being conceived by reason (*cuius esse est intelligi*), though not without some foundation in reality, namely, beings of reason (cf. Klima 1996).

Thus, for Aquinas, the verb "est", both as an absolute predicate and as a copula, signifies existence (*esse*). As an absolute predicate, as in "Tom is" or "Jerry is" it signifies the acts of existence (*esse*, or *actus essendi*) of the things of which it is predicated. But since these acts of existence are determined by the essences which they actualize and which are signified by the same things' essential predicates,

the verb can also signify the same acts of existence when it joins the names of these things to their essential predicates, as in "Tom is a cat" or "Jerry is a mouse". But then again, when the verb copulates accidental predicates to their subjects, then it will signify the acts of being of their accidents, its sense now being determined to express the peculiar mode of being (*modus essendi*) of accidents, as in "Tom is black" or "Jerry is grey". And for the same reason the same verb will express yet another sense of being when its sense is determined by what is signified by a privative predicate, or any other predicate signifying some being of reason (*ens rationis*), as in "Tom is blind" or "Jerry is reasoned by Tom".

Accordingly, in Aquinas' view, the different analogical senses of being, related to its primary sense (expressing existence absolutely speaking) closely reflect the different ways in which things are: their *modi essendi*. In this way, his doctrine is akin in spirit to the theories of the modists (*modistae*), whose main tenet was that different ways of being are reflected in corresponding ways of understanding (*modi intelligendi*), expressed, in turn, in corresponding ways of signifying (*modi significandi*) (cf. *modistae*, Ebbesen 1998; Marmo 1999; Zupko 2008).

However, even the modists did not think that one could simply "read off" one's ontology from one's syntax, and neither did Aquinas, nor any other medieval thinker. On a general level, nearly everybody would hold that the ways in which things exist are reflected somehow in the ways in which we think, which in turn are reflected in the ways in which our words signify. But the important metaphysical differences between individual thinkers of the period can actually be characterized by the different ways in which they would depart from a simplistic "mirroring" interpretation of this "modistic principle": the different ways in which they think the structure of language and thought diverges from the structure of reality.

For instance, Aquinas insists time and again that Plato's main error concerning universals was his failure to realize the difference between *modi essendi* and *intelligendi* and *significandi*: just because we have universal words and concepts, it does not mean that there are corresponding universal things, for our universal words and concepts represent only singular things (since every really existing thing is singular), but in a universal manner. So, there are certain words and concepts representing things in some way, but there are no things existing in the same way: things exist in one way (singularly and materially) and are represented in another way (universally and immaterially) (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 85 a. 1 ad 1). Therefore, the "modistic principle" in its

simplistic, “mirroring” interpretation cannot be upheld by any philosophers who reject a naïve Platonic conception of universals, as did all major thinkers in the thirteenth century. The differences among these thinkers were always in the finer details.

The Analogy Versus Univocity of Being and the Thesis of Real Distinction

Although Aquinas’ theory of the analogy of being seemed to cohere well both with Aristotle’s teaching and with the requirements of religious and theological language about God, many authors challenged the view that the sense of “being” would vary with whatever it is attributed to. To be sure, thirteenth-century authors agreed that different kinds of things existed in radically different ways. Indeed, based on Aristotle’s considerations in the *Categories* alone, it was taken for granted that the mode of being of substances (namely, subsisting on their own without inhering in an underlying subject) is radically different from (indeed, opposite to) the mode of being of accidents (namely, inhering in an underlying subject) (cf. *Substance, accidents and modes*, in this volume). And of course it was also generally held that the way God exists is infinitely more perfect and, hence, is radically different from the way limited creaturely natures can exist. But there were differences in how individual authors interpreted these differences themselves in their metaphysics and theology, and how they thought these differences are properly reflected in thought and language, in their semantic considerations.

For Aquinas (who was influenced on this point by Avicenna’s doctrine), the ultimate difference between God and creatures is the real distinction between essence and existence in creatures and the identity thereof in the absolutely simple God. It is precisely this famous “thesis of the real distinction” that prompts Aquinas to think of creaturely natures as imposing diminishing determinations on being, which without such a limitation is unlimited:

- ▶ A created spiritual substance has to contain two [principles], one of which is related to the other as potency to act. And this is clear from the following. It is obvious that the first being, which is God, is infinite act, namely, having in Himself the whole plenitude of being not contracted to the nature of some genus or species. Therefore it is necessary that His being itself should not be an act of being that is, as it were, put into a nature which is not its own being, for in this way it would be confined to that nature. Hence we say that God is His own being. But this cannot be said about anything else, just as it is impossible to think that there should be several separate whitenesses, but if

a whiteness were separate from any subject and recipient, then it would be only one, so it is impossible that there should be a subsistent act of being, except only one. Therefore, everything else after the first being, since it is not its own being, has being received in something, by which its being is contracted; and thus in any created being the nature of the thing that participates being is other than the act of being itself that is participated (*De spiritualibus creaturis* q. un., a. 1).

Thus, for Aquinas, creaturely essences impose a limitation, and so a diminishing determination on being itself (as it would be found in God, without any limitation), precisely because of the real distinction between essence and existence in creatures, whereas the divine essence does not impose such a limitation on divine being, precisely because they are really one and the same infinite reality. It is this order of reality of the different modes of being that is reflected in the different, analogically related senses of “being”, expressing an analogical notion of being. The reason for this parallelism between different modes of being and the analogical senses of “being” seems to be that predications of “being” of any creature *x* of nature *N* may be viewed as a predication of “IS” in the unlimited sense (in which it only applies to God) with the added diminishing qualification referring to *N*, determining precisely the sense of “being” in which it can apply to a creature of nature *N*; that is to say, “*x* is a being (of nature *N*)” if and only if “*x* IS-with-respect-to-*N*” (cf. Klima 2002c).

However, motivated either by Averroes’ interpretation of Aristotle, or by Augustine’s Neo-Platonic theological doctrine, philosophers, such as Siger of Brabant, as well as theologians, such as Henry of Ghent, rejected a real distinction of essence and existence even in creatures, arguing that existence cannot be something really distinct, added to essence as another “thing” (although Giles of Rome held precisely this view in his debate with Henry of Ghent) (cf. Lambertini 2008). Consequently, these authors had a different interpretation of both the Aristotelian metaphysical doctrine of the analogy of being between substance and accident, and the philosophical-theological doctrine of the difference between God and creatures. However, if essence and existence are not really distinct in creatures, then essences cannot act as diminishing determinations on existence in the way Aquinas conceived.

On Henry’s view, essences in themselves, as they are eternally in the divine mind, have their own eternal essential being (*esse essentiae*), grounding the eternal truths of essential predications (such as “Man is an animal”).

However, these essences are realized in actual existence in the creation of singulars, in which their acts of actual existence (*esse actualis existentiae*) are intentionally distinct (are represented by different intentions, that is, concepts), but not really distinct from the essences of these singulars (although, as Henry insists, this distinction is not *merely* a conceptual one) (cf. Porro 2008). But then this conception breaks the strict logical relationship of the Thomistic conception between different modes of being and the different analogical senses of the term “being” in which it is truly predicable of different sorts of entities of different natures. If different creaturely natures are not construed as adding diminishing determinations to their distinct acts of being, then the analogically related notions of being are not regarded as derivable from a primary notion through extension by the addition of diminishing qualifications. Rather, different notions of being are arrived at simply through the specification of different kinds of beings in terms of their different natures. However, this move, at least in principle, gives rise to the possibility of abstracting some generic notion of being univocally applying to several kinds of entities, just as we can abstract generic notions of different specific natures, and so, the more specific notions of being expressing the different ways of being in which things of different natures exist are just different specifications of the original, confused, unlimited notion, applying to all.

To be sure, Henry still insists that our intellect cannot form a single concept that would equally apply to God and creatures, on account of the infinite essential difference of perfection between God and creatures. But, at the same time, he also granted that we at least appear to have a single concept of being applying to God and creatures, because we just tend to confuse the two different ways of abstracting the notion of being that applies to God and the notion of being that applies to creatures, resulting in a concept of being which is “something analogous common to Creator and creature, containing under itself being as principle and being as produced (*commune analogum ad creatorem et creaturam, continens sub se ens principium et ens principiatum*).” (Henry of Ghent 1520: *Summa*, art. 21, q. 3, f. 126rD)

Nevertheless, this conception quite clearly opens up the possibility of another departure from the “modistic principle”: different modes of being do not demand different senses of the term “being” to express them, for all these different modes can be apprehended indifferently by a single concept, providing the meaning of a single univocal term, allowing reasoning about any being as such, without a risk of the fallacy of equivocation. In fact, this was precisely one of the main motivations for Duns Scotus

to endorse a theory of the univocity of being, as opposed to the Thomistic theory of the analogy of being, or rather as more directly opposed to Henry’s conception of two distinct, yet analogically related notions of being (cf. Scotus 1950: *Ord.*, 1, d. 3, pars 1, q. 1–2, n. 26–56; Dumont 1998).

Consider the following syllogism: Anything that is a bat is a flying mammal; any baseball bat is a bat; therefore, any baseball bat is a flying mammal. The argument is clearly not valid, insofar as the premises are true, because in the sense in which a flying mammal is a bat, a baseball bat is not a bat. The argument is vitiated by the fallacy of equivocation. But this holds, apparently, not only in the case of equivocal terms, but also in the case of analogical terms. Consider the following argument: Everything that is healthy is alive; but the food on your plate is healthy; therefore, the food on your plate is alive. Clearly, unless you are about to consume something that is alive, the food on your plate is healthy only in the sense that it makes you healthy, but not in the sense that it is alive and well. However, it is only in that sense of “healthy” that the first premise can be true. So, an argument of this sort is fallacious even with analogical terms. Accordingly, if “being” cannot be predicated of God and creatures in the same sense, then, apparently, all arguments arguing from creaturely being to divine being are fallacious (which would render absolutely all arguments about God fallacious, provided that all predications are just variously determined predications of being, and all our cognition derives from our cognition of creatures).

To be sure, Thomists could still respond, as for instance Aquinas’ great commentator Cajetan did, that some analogical terms still possess sufficient unity to secure the validity of reasoning with them. Take for instance the following argument: Whatever is seen is cognized; this mathematical problem is seen by the intellect; therefore this mathematical problem is cognized. Clearly, in this piece of reasoning, the minor premise is true only in the secondary sense of “see,” in which it applies to the intellect, whereas the major premise is true whether “see” is taken in the bodily or in the intellectual sense. By contrast, consider the following argument: Whatever is seen is colored; this mathematical problem is seen by the intellect; therefore this mathematical problem is colored. In this case, the major premise is true only in the bodily sense of “see,” whereas the minor premise is only true in the intellectual sense, and that is why there is fallacy in the argument. However, in the previous argument there is no fallacy precisely because the major premise is true in both related senses (cf. Hochschild 2007).

Nevertheless, however the case may be with the debate between Thomists and Scotists, it is clear that Scotus' doctrine is another step away from a simplistically interpreted "modistic principle," although in the opposite direction: just as the order of being need not precisely match the conceptual order (that is, every distinction of concepts need not have a corresponding real distinction among beings), so different modes of being need not be reflected in different (although possibly related or "partially identical") concepts. Thus, Scotus' doctrine of the univocity of being, while still recognizing different modes of being in reality, simply allows the possibility that the intellect can form a simple concept indifferently representing them all, without there being a simple, common reality directly and adequately represented by this concept. Viewed from this perspective, Scotus' move seems to fit squarely into a general trend in late-medieval philosophy: the elaboration of ever more refined accounts of just how the conceptual order may differ from the real order, culminating in fourteenth-century nominalism.

Although Scotus' treatment of the notion of being may be regarded as a part of this trend, his treatment of universals in general still seems to hearken back to "the modistic principle": common terms of our language apply to several, numerically distinct singular things of the same kind, because these things share a common nature, which, to be sure, is not some numerically one real entity on a par with the singulars themselves, but still has its own "less-than-numerical unity" and its corresponding mode of being, preceding any act of the intellect conceiving it. Yet, Scotus' treatment of "being" indicates that, at least from a semantic point of view, there is no real need to posit such common natures to account for the universal mental and linguistic representation of singulars. Thus, his younger contemporary Henry of Harclay could rightly insist, precisely on the basis of Scotus' own doctrine of the univocity of being, that our intellect is capable of forming concepts that indifferently represent singulars of the same kind without representing a single common entity (whether it is supposed to be numerically or merely less-than-numerically one). It is precisely this idea that seems to have been seized upon by William Ockham, to be worked out in detail in his nominalist philosophy and theology (Henninger 2006).

From Metaphysics, Back to Semantics

Given its centrality in the semantic framework in which it was articulated, it is no wonder that the notion of being took on so many varieties and gave rise to so many metaphysical problems. After all, in this framework, all true predications are taken to be verified by the actual being of

the *significata* of our predicates, whether those *significata* are taken to be the natures or substantial forms of substances, or their accidental forms, their quantities, qualities, relations, actions, passions, times, places, positions or habits, or even not any genuine forms, but rather the lack thereof, that is, privations, or other beings of reason, such as negations or relations of reason. In fact, we may add to the list of such "quasi-entities" demanded by this framework the *significata* of entire propositions, variously called *dicta*, *enuntiabilia*, or *complexe significabilia*, etc. (Nuchelmans 1973, 1980).

In general, one may say that in this framework there is some "nonchalance" toward admitting semantic values (as they called them, *significata* and *supposita*, cf. Read 2008) of our expressions in our ontology, relegating the task of sorting them out to metaphysics. And this is precisely what thirteenth-century metaphysicians do: they make various classifications of various sorts of beings (based primarily on Aristotle's system of the categories), and ever more refined distinctions and identifications among the semantic values of various expressions in different linguistic categories, leading to a burgeoning ontology of entities and quasi-entities, having different degrees of reality (or unreality, for that matter), and different, sometimes rather obscure criteria of identity or distinctness (or quasi-identity and quasi-distinctness: see the above-mentioned examples of Scotus' less-than-numerical-unity, or Henry of Ghent's intentional distinction, let alone Scotus' formal distinction, or Suarez's modal distinction) (see Suarez 1947).

The following table provides a general overview of the varieties of being entertained by medieval philosophers working in this framework, sketching out "the big picture" of the ontology or "quasi-ontology" (containing also various sorts of quasi-entities) of what may be termed the framework of the realist "*via antiqua* semantics" in contrast to the nominalist "*via moderna* semantics," emerging in the works of William Ockham and his followers, such as John Buridan, Albert of Saxony, Marsilius of Inghen, Pierre d'Ailly or Gabriel Biel (Table 1).

Given the immense complexity of the resulting ontology, one can certainly understand Ockham's complaint, according to which his contemporaries are guilty of "multiplying beings according to the multiplicity of terms. . . which, however, is erroneous and leads far away from the truth." (Ockham 1974:169. See also page 171, where Ockham explicitly claims that this is the root (radix) of the errors of "the moderns.")

To be sure, Ockham's charge is not exactly justified. After all, as we could see, even earlier authors could reduce the ontological commitment of their theories by either

identifying the semantic values of expressions across different categories (as when following Aristotle, they declare that action and passion are the same motion, or when they identify relations with their foundations in the categories of quality or quantity, etc.) or by assigning them some “diminished” ontological status, by relegating them to some class of “quasi-entities.” However, it is true that earlier authors, taking it for granted that our meaningful words are meaningful because they express concepts whereby we conceive of something, never worried about assigning semantic values to our phrases, and took it to be a *metaphysical task* to sort out the ontological status, identity, and distinctness of these semantic values, leading to the ever more rarified metaphysical and theological questions in this framework.

Ockham’s real innovation, therefore, consisted not so much in producing a simpler ontology (since that, in principle, would have been available to his predecessors as well), but rather in reining in any unwanted “ontological excesses” *already in his semantics*. That is to say, the real novelty in Ockham’s approach is the elimination of unwanted ontological commitments, not only through metaphysical argument (resulting in identifying the semantic values of different expressions across categories or relegating them to some diminished ontological status), but rather through semantic analysis, which has remained ever since the most powerful weapon in the conceptual arsenal of nominalist philosophers (cf. Goodman and Quine 1947).

Just by way of a quick illustration, let us consider a simple example of how commitment to such quasi-entities as privations comes about in the older framework, and how Ockham can get rid of it through logical analysis (cf. Klima 1993). Take the privative term “blind”, which can obviously be true of something only if the thing in question lacks sight, that it could and ought to have by nature (namely, an animal that ought to have sight, but lacks it for some reason or other). In the older framework, if the predication “Jerry is blind” is true, then this is so, just as in the case of every other true predication, because what the predicate signifies in the subject is actually there in the subject (which is precisely the actuality that the word “is” signifies). But precisely because for blindness to be there is for the corresponding sight not to be there, the being of blindness cannot be taken to be being in the same sense as the being of sight; therefore, blindness has to be a being in a different sense, a being of reason. And similar considerations apply to all sorts of privations, negations, or relations of reason, thus opening up the “quasi-ontological” realm of beings of reason in this framework.

Ockham, on the other hand, uses logical analysis to show that for the true predication of the term “blind” and similar privative terms we need not posit any such quasi-entities. As the nominal definition of the term shows, this syntactically simple term must have a complex concept corresponding to it in the mind, namely, the concept properly expressed by the nominal definition “animal not having sight.” Now, in this phrase, there are two *absolute* terms (terms applying equally and indifferently to whatever they signify, on account of being subordinated to the corresponding absolute concepts), namely, “animal” and “sight.” There is also a *connotative* term (signifying some of the things they signify primarily and others secondarily, connoting them only in relation to the former, on account of being subordinated to a connotative concept), namely, the term “having”, primarily signifying the things that have something and connoting the things had by them. Finally, there is the syncategorematic term “not”, which does not signify anything in external reality, only the mental concept of negation, which is a mental act, merely modifying the representative function of the categorematic concept with which it is construed (cf. Klima 2006). Thus, the complex connotative concept to which the term “blind” is subordinated will signify animals, while connoting their sight; however, on account of the implied negation it will only apply to animals that do not have sight. Thus, on this analysis, the sentence “Jerry is blind” will be true just in case Jerry is one of the animals that do not have sight, just as it should be. However, the important difference of this analysis from the former is that this analysis does not require the actuality of some quasi-entity, namely, the privation of Jerry’s sight: the term “blind” applies to Jerry simply because he does not have sight, which is just what the negative connotation of the term requires. But this negative connotation is effected through the term’s signifying only positive, real entities, namely, animals, their sights, and a positive quality of the mind, namely, the syncategorematic concept of negation.

Without going into further details, perhaps, even this brief illustration will suffice to indicate how, through such and similar analyses, Ockham is eventually able to come up with a much simpler, reduced ontological picture (see Klima 1999). In his semantics, all our linguistic expressions are mapped onto an ontology containing only two really distinct categories of entities, namely, entities belonging to the category of substance, and entities pertaining to the category of quality, some of which, however, are qualities of the mind, namely, those naturally representative mental concepts whereby we conceive of objects of our cognition (i.e., the categorematic concepts that provide the sense of our categorematic terms) or

those mental concepts that merely have the function of modifying the representative function of the former (i.e., our syncategorematic concepts, providing the meaning of our syncategorematic terms).

As we can see, the semantic construction of the *via antiqua* certainly demanded the mapping of language onto a rich and complex structure of semantic values, accorded with different degrees or modes of reality, expressed perhaps in correspondingly distinguished senses of “being” (*ens*), among those who endorsed a strong doctrine of the analogy of being, such as Aquinas and his followers, or without such distinctions, among those who endorsed the doctrine of the univocity of “being,” such as Scotus and his followers. In any case, the rather “cavalier” assignment of semantic values to all linguistic items in any syntactical category in this semantic framework left it to metaphysics to sort out into which ontological categories these semantic values fall, and whether they are distinct or identical. Indeed, the latter questions led to distinctions among various forms of distinctions as well, ranging from numerical and real, to less-than-numerical, intentional, formal, modal, or mere conceptual distinctions. Nevertheless, the metaphysical strategies of distinguishing various modes of being and/or senses of “being” and allowing the identification or quasi-identification of semantic values of expressions in various categories could in principle yield in this framework a real ontology (i.e., an ontology of real entities, not considering any quasi-entities) no more profligate than the parsimonious nominalist ontology of Ockham, acknowledging only two distinct categories of singular entities, namely, substances and qualities.

Ockham’s genuine innovation, therefore, was not so much in ontology *per se*, but rather in the ways and strategies he applied to reduce ontological commitment in the semantic theory itself. Thus, for him, the reduction of ontological commitment, in contrast to the *via antiqua* strategy, was not a separate metaphysical task to bring metaphysical order to a burgeoning quasi-ontology of “recklessly” assigned semantic values, but rather the direct task of semantic theory itself, carefully working out the mappings of distinct linguistic categories onto a parsimoniously construed ontology, containing only real entities in the “permitted” categories.

Thus, Ockham’s ontology can be represented by means of the following, much simpler diagram, cutting the former diagram in half, and reducing its inner contents as well (Table 2).

In this diagram, quasi-entities are gone: the phrases apparently designating them are all analyzed in terms of their nominal definitions, containing only phrases that denote or connote entities in the “permitted” distinct

categories of substance and quality. A similar strategy allows the reduction of really distinct real categories from ten to just two. In fact, Ockham’s approach is so successful that one wonders why he even needs two categories. In principle, a simple homogenous category, the category of substance, would do for the purposes of his semantics.

As Marilyn Adams has convincingly argued (notably, on the basis of a passage from Buridan’s *Questions on Aristotle’s De Anima*, see Adams 1989:283–285), the need to posit a distinct category of quality stems from the need to explain genuine alteration as a change in quality, without having to resort to a “quantitative” analysis of it in terms of an atomistic physics. Thus, although logical analysis alone would allow a reduction of ontology to a single category, further considerations in metaphysics and physics do necessitate further ontological distinctions.

Indeed, it is precisely such further, metaphysical and physical reasons that prompt the great “systematizer and legitimizer” of Ockhamist nominalism, John Buridan to depart from Ockham’s ontology, despite sharing virtually the same semantics (see the entry on *John Buridan* in this volume).

To be sure, despite the nominalist project of “ontological reduction,” in the nominalist semantic framework itself there is still what contemporary philosophers would identify as “quantification over non-existents,” and hence *ontological commitment* to some “weird entities.” However, in general, in medieval logic, quantification was not regarded as carrying ontological commitment. What we can refer to and quantify over may have been something, could be something, or, possibly, will be something, but if it is not actually one among the things presently populating our universe, then it is not anything, i.e., it is literally *nothing* (cf. Klima 2001:197–226, 2009:143–174). Thus, in the nominalist logical framework *to be* is simply to be identical with one of the actually existing things. Accordingly, although the affirmative copula in this framework still carries “existential import,” it does not *predicate* existence (whether absolutely or as qualified by the *significata* of the predicate). Rather, it is merely a syncategorematic sign of the identity of the *supposita* of the terms of an affirmative proposition. Therefore, perhaps paradoxically, the verb “est”, functioning as a copula, does not even express the notion of being. In this sense, nominalist logic completely broke the strong links assumed in the older framework between the various modes of predication (construed as various ways of saying that something is), and the various ways in which things are.

See also: ► [Essence and Existence](#)

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Aquinas Thomas (1980) *Opera Omnia*. Frommann-Holzboog, Bad-Cannstatt
- Henry of Ghent (1520) *Summae quaestionum ordinariarum. Vaenundatur in aedibus Iodoci Badii Ascensii, Parisiis*. (Repr. (1953). The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure; E. Nauwelaerts, Louvain; F. Schönig, Paderborn)
- Scotus John Duns (1950) *Opera Omnia. Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, Civitas Vaticana*
- Suarez Francisco (1947) *On the various kinds of distinctions (Disputationes metaphysicae, Disputatio VII, de variis distinctionum generibus)* (trans: intro. Vollert C). Marquette University Press, Milwaukee
- William Ockham (1974) *Summa Logicae*. In: Boehner Ph et al (eds) *Opera Philosophica, vol I*. The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure

Secondary Sources

- Adams MM (1989) *William Ockham, 2 vols*. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, pp 283–285. 2nd rev. edn., 1987
- Dumont S (1998) Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus. In: Marenbon J (ed) *Medieval philosophy*. Routledge, London-New York, pp 291–328
- Ebbesen S (1998) The Paris arts faculty: Siger of Brabant, Boethius of Dacia, Radulphus Brito. In: Marenbon J (ed) *Medieval philosophy. The Routledge history of philosophy, III*. Routledge, London/New York, pp 269–290
- Goodman N, Quine WVO (1947) Steps toward a constructive nominalism. *J Symbolic Logic* 12:105–122
- Henninger M (2006) Henry of Harclay on the univocal concept of being. *Mediaeval Stud* 68:205–237
- Hochschild J (2007) Cajetan on Scotus on univocity. *Proc Soc Medieval Logic Metaphys* 7:32–42. <http://faculty.fordham.edu/klima/SMLM/PSMLM7/PSMLM7.pdf>
- Jacobi K (1986) Peter Abelard's investigations into the meaning and function of the speech sign "Est." In: Knuutila S, Hintikka J (eds) *The logic of being*. Reidel, Dordrecht, pp 145–180
- King P (2008) Peter Abelard. The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition). In: Zalta EN (ed) <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/abelard/>
- Klima G (1993) The changing role of Entia Rationis in medieval philosophy: a comparative study with a reconstruction. *Synthese* 96:25–59
- Klima G (1996) The semantic principles underlying Saint Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics of being. *Medieval Phil Theol* 5:87–141
- Klima G (1999) Ockham's semantics and ontology of the categories. In: Spade PV (ed) *The Cambridge companion to Ockham*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp 118–142
- Klima G (2001) Existence and reference in medieval logic. In: Hieke A, Morscher E (eds) *New essays in free logic*. Kluwer, Dordrecht, pp 197–226
- Klima G (2002a) Contemporary "Essentialism" vs. Aristotelian Essentialism." In: Haldane J (ed) *Mind, metaphysics, and value in the Thomistic and analytic traditions*. University of Notre Dame Press, South Bend, pp 175–194
- Klima G (2002b) Aquinas' theory of the copula and the analogy of being. *Logical Anal Hist Phil* 5:159–176
- Klima G (2002c) Thomas Sutton and Henry of Ghent on the analogy of being. *Proc Soc Medieval Logic Metaphys* 2:34–44. <http://www.fordham.edu/gsas/phil/klima/SMLM/PSMLM2/PSMLM2.pdf>
- Klima G (2004) On Kenny on Aquinas on being: a critical review of Aquinas on being by Anthony Kenny. *Feature Rev Int Phil Quart* 44:567–580
- Klima G (2006) Syncategoremata. In: Brown K (ed) *Elsevier's encyclopedia of language and linguistics, 2nd edn., vol 12*. Elsevier, Oxford, pp 353–356
- Klima G (2009) *John Buridan, Great Medieval Thinkers Series*, Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Lambertini R (2008) Giles of Rome. The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition). In: Zalta EN (ed) <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/giles/>
- Marmo C (1999) The semantics of the Modistae. In: Ebbesen S, Friedman RL (eds) *Medieval analyses in language and cognition. Acts of the Symposium, "The Copenhagen School of Medieval Philosophy," January 10–13, 1996*. Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters. Reitzels, Copenhagen, pp 83–104
- Moore WL (1989) Via Moderna. In: Strayer JR (ed) *Dictionary of middle ages, vol 12*. Scribner, New York, pp 406–409
- Nuchelmans G (1973) *Theories of the proposition: ancient and medieval conceptions of the bearers of truth and falsity*. North Holland, Amsterdam
- Nuchelmans G (1980) *Late scholastic and humanist theories of the proposition*. North Holland, Amsterdam
- Oberman HA (1977) *Werden und Wertung der Reformation: Vom Wegestreit zum Glaubenskampf*. J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen
- Porro P (2008) Henry of Ghent. The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition). In: Zalta EN (ed) <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/henry-ghent/>
- Read S (2008) Medieval theories: properties of terms. The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition). In: Zalta EN (ed) <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/medieval-terms/>
- Zupko J (2008) Thomas of Erfurt. The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition). In: Zalta EN (ed) <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/erfurt/>

Being. Table 1 The “quasi-ontology” of “*via antiqua* semantics”

	Past	Present	Future	
Real beings	Ten categories of real entities, possible in the past	Ten categories of real entities, possible in the present	Ten categories of real entities, possible in the future	Possible
	Ten categories of real entities, actual in the past	Ten categories of real entities, actual in the present	Ten categories of real entities, actual in the future	Actual
“Quasi-beings” in <i>esse intentionale, esse objectivo, esse rationis</i>	Individual quasi-entities (privations, relations of reason), <i>significata</i> of propositions, actual in the past	Individual quasi-entities (privations, relations of reason), <i>significata</i> of propositions, actual in the present	Individual quasi-entities (privations, relations of reason), <i>significata</i> of propositions, actual in the future	
	Individual quasi-entities (privations, relations of reason), <i>significata</i> of propositions, possible in the past	Individual quasi-entities (privations, relations of reason), <i>significata</i> of propositions, possible in the present	Individual quasi-entities (privations, relations of reason), <i>significata</i> of propositions, possible in the future	
	Individual quasi-entities (privations, relations of reason), <i>significata</i> of propositions, impossible in the past	Individual quasi-entities (privations, relations of reason), <i>significata</i> of propositions, impossible in the present	Individual quasi-entities (privations, relations of reason), <i>significata</i> of propositions, impossible in the future	Impossible
	Universals			Abstract

(Note that I am using the designations of “*via antiqua* semantics” and “*via moderna* semantics” slightly anachronistically, to designate two radically different ways of construing semantic theory in late-medieval philosophy and theology, which I take to be the conceptual basis for the historically somewhat later separation of the two *viae* as the altogether different ways of doing philosophy and theology, leading to the so-called *Wegestreit*, the historical “quarrel of the ways” in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For a detailed historical discussion of the late-medieval separation of the *via antiqua* and the *via moderna*, see Moore 1989. For the impact of the separation of these two ways on the emergence of “the battle of the faiths,” *Glaubenskampf*, in the age of the Protestant Reformation, see Oberman 1977.

Being. Table 2 Ockham's ontology

	Past	Present	Future	
Real beings	Two categories of real entities, possible in the past	Two categories of real entities, possible in the present	Two categories of real entities, possible in the future	Possible
	Two categories of real entities, actual in the past	Two categories of actual real entities	Two categories of real entities, actual in the future	Actual

Galley Proof