

# The Inquiry Into Being

by *Cédric Mouriès*

---

**Despite repeated proclamations of the death of metaphysics, the contemporary philosophical landscape is marked by the proliferation of ontologies. Sébastien Motta sets out to demonstrate the sterility of the ontological enterprise through a logical analysis of their assumptions.**

---

About: Sébastien Motta, *Le Mélange des genres, Critique de l'ontologie par l'élucidation du concept d'identité*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, coll. « Philosophies contemporaines », 2021, 419 p., 46 €.

Ontology presents itself as a super-generalist science whose object of study is “all that is, insofar as all that is has being in common” (p. 335). While the first explicit project for a “science of being as being” dates back to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*,<sup>1</sup> the word “ontology” – formed directly from the Greek *ôn, ontos*, meaning “being,” “that which is” – did not appear until the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The term then slowly spread and came to designate “general” metaphysics as opposed to “special” metaphysics: Whereas metaphysics focuses on the study of special, eminent beings (God, the universe, the soul), ontology is concerned with being in general, that is, with the being of beings, with beings as they are.

Given the various proclamations of the death of metaphysics, one could expect ontology to have fallen into disuse. Yet the opposite is true. Ontology is surprisingly alive and well in contemporary philosophy, particularly in the analytic field, where it generally takes two main forms: an inquiry into the nature of being, on the one hand,

---

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Γ 1 (1003a21), transl. Joe Sachs, Santa Fe (NM), Green Lion Press, 1999.

and an inventory of beings that usually appears as a list of categories of *what there is*, on the other.<sup>2</sup> Thus, one might wonder what is the mode of existence of mathematical objects: Can these objects be said to exist in the sense that tables and chairs exist, and should they therefore be counted among what there is in the world? The debate can also focus on the being of certain fictional entities: Sherlock Holmes, for instance, never existed in the sense that Arthur Conan-Doyle did, and it is indeed an essential feature of fictional beings that they do not exist. Yet, Sherlock Holmes is not nothing: He does exist in a sense since we read stories about him and know all about his main character and physical features. Reflecting on this type of case leads to asking the ontological question in its two forms: In order to determine whether Sherlock Holmes exists, one must both investigate what it is to be and try to identify the categories that constitute the world.

In *Le Mélange des genres* (The mix of genres), Sébastien Motta sets out to demonstrate the sterility of these debates and of the ontological enterprise in general, whatever its form. He not only argues that nothing of importance or substance is at stake in ontological debates, but also claims that ontology simply has no object. He begins his argument with an analysis of the notion of identity: His aim is to show that errors in understanding the logical regime of identity have led ontologists to make careless use of certain key notions of ontology such as object, category, existence, or reality. Following in the footsteps of thinkers like Wittgenstein or Carnap, Motta highlights that the assumptions of ontology most often derive from logical or grammatical confusions and are in fact groundless. This devastating critique builds on a central argument: Ontologists confuse two kinds of concepts that are very different in their logical regimes, namely *substantial* concepts and *formal* concepts.<sup>3</sup> Motta clarifies this point by comparing two kinds of verbs. On the one hand, verbs like “to run,” whose corresponding action is always obvious even in the absence of a complement<sup>4</sup>—such verbs have a *substantial* use insofar as they have an intrinsic content, that is, a substantial meaning by virtue of which they can signify without being linked to anything else; on the other hand, verbs like “to do,” which on the contrary can be considered to be empty and to require a complement in order to have meaning—such verbs have a *formal* use insofar as their meaning is determined only by

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Willard Van Orman Quine’s famous article, “On What There Is” (1948), in *From a Logical Point of View*, New York, Harvard University Press, 1953, pp. 1-19, which seems to have revived the ontological debate around this question.

<sup>3</sup> As deployed by Motta, this distinction is reminiscent of the categorematic/syncategorematic distinction.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, the formal/substantial distinction does not overlap with the transitive/intransitive distinction.

being linked to something else. To sum up the distinction, to “run” is necessarily to do “something” (substantial) whereas to “do” is not necessarily to do “something.” For Motta, ontology ultimately originates from the confusion between these two logically very different uses: Ontologists make substantial use of formal concepts. This is the “mix of genres” that Motta deplors and that gives the book its title.

## A Reassessment of the Standard Conception of Identity

In the field of philosophy, identity<sup>5</sup> is most often defined as numerical identity, that is, as the relationship a being has to itself. Following the classic example, identity is the relationship to itself that characterizes the Ship of Theseus: The ship never ceases to be the same ship, even though one of its components is replaced every day such that no original component remains by the time it returns to port. To put it differently, identity is that by virtue of which we can say that the ship is indeed the *same* ship, regardless of all the changes it has undergone. There exists then what Motta calls a “standard conception of identity”<sup>6</sup> (p. 23) on which most thinkers seem to agree spontaneously, that is, a conception that is broadly accepted by ontologists as if it were self-evident. Motta’s analysis here is threefold: First, he establishes a clear distinction between the different elements of this conception that rests on a number of hidden assumptions; second, he assesses the compatibility of these assumptions with each other; third, he questions the validity of each of these assumptions.

When we define identity as the relationship a thing has to itself, we generally make several assumptions that seem to be logically implied by the principle of identity. In particular, we assume that identity is a relationship of equivalence that is at once absolute and universal (everything is necessarily identical to itself), unique and logically primitive (*i.e.*, non-analyzable), and indispensable and necessary (any relationship of identity is such that it cannot not be or be other than it is). These different elements do not, however, have the same importance: The core of the SCI truly lies in the characterization of identity as a relationship. As Motta makes clear, the assumptions contained in this conception are rarely supported by proper arguments. But are they self-evident? Motta argues otherwise, showing that conceiving of identity

---

<sup>5</sup> I am obviously talking about identity in the sense of a logical principle, and not in the cultural or social sense of *identitarian*.

<sup>6</sup> Hereafter referred to as “SCI.”

as a relationship implies neither that it is a relationship of equivalence, nor that it is necessary, universal, or absolute.

Yet, Motta's most forceful critique of the SCI lies in his challenge to the idea that identity is simply a relationship. In his view, this idea is the result of confusion about the logical regime of ordinary expressions of identity such as "being the same." The mistake is to think that expressions of this kind are meaningful in themselves, and that it therefore makes sense to make *substantial* use of them. In reality, such expressions are *formal* in that they require a predicate. The analogy with the terms "only" and "alone" is perfectly illuminating in this respect. It is indeed tempting to think of "being the only" as a property. However, unlike "alone," which is indeed a property, "the only" requires a predicate, because to say of a man that he is "the only" without any further specification is inevitably to expose oneself to the question: "the only *what*?" If "the only" is understood to mean that "there is no other man," this cannot be taken to be a property of the man himself. This analysis shows that an expression such as "being the only" only has meaning in terms of the predicate it inevitably requires. No sensible use can be made of it without a predicate. By analogy, the author concludes that any allegedly substantial use of the expression "being the same" is meaningless and that to see a relationship in it is the result of an error. When we speak of "being the same" absolutely as if this were a relationship, we simply do not know *what* we are talking about.

At the end of this analysis, it becomes clear not only that the SCI as it usually presents itself is of dubious coherence, but also that its very foundation is highly questionable. The notion of identity is not a substantial concept. It follows from this that ontological endeavors based on the SCI are meaningless.

## **The Inventory of Beings**

As earlier indicated, the ontological enterprise largely consists of producing inventories of what there is in the world. Of course, this does not amount to producing an exhaustive list of individual beings, but rather to categorizing them. Insofar as the question "what is in the world?" requires a theoretical answer, it asks about the different kinds of things that are found in the world. Categorizing things does not usually pose a particular problem, and we generally have relatively clear criteria for doing so. Thus, to take Motta's example, boxers are specifically categorized according to their weight (flyweight, featherweight, lightweight, *etc.*, each category

corresponding to a very precise value in kilograms). However, the search for ontological categories raises some difficulties because, unlike for most ordinary categories, it is not clear at all what makes a category ontological. Ontological categories, it will be argued, must be categories *of being*. Yet insofar as boxers *are*, then is not “flyweight” a category *of being*? While this is indeed the case, ontological research is not aimed at categorizing what is, but rather at identifying the essential articulations of being itself. In other words, it is driven by the assumption that some categories are distinguished from all others by their importance. But what is the objective criterion for this importance?

As if this were self-evident, it is the criterion of generality that is most readily put forward. And this for a simple reason: Insofar as being encompasses all that is, the categories *of being* are supposed to be the most encompassing, and therefore the most general. However, as Motta’s critique makes clear, adopting such a criterion raises insurmountable difficulties. To give an idea of the author’s reasoning, let us take a closer look at his analysis of two categories that are often used by ontologists: event and place.

On what might the generality of these categories be based? Using the criterion of number, a category can be said to be general if it encompasses a sufficient number of “entities”; yet, in reality, this superficially clear idea is ineffective. For instance, it seems intuitively obvious that the notion of “event” is more general than that of “explosion”: If every explosion is an event and every event is not an explosion, then we can legitimately assume that there are more events than there are explosions. Such clarity, however, is only apparent: We can argue that there are more events than explosions, but we cannot say by how many. To do this, we would have to be able to count events the way we count boxers. What is missing here is a clear criterion of identity. The difficulty does not lie in our capacity to know (in which case, there would be too many events for us to count). It is rather of a logical nature: We do not know with sufficient clarity what constitutes an event because we do not have sufficiently clear criteria for determining what is an event and what is not. As a result, we cannot make *substantial* use of the concept of event. And yet, it is precisely the substantial use of concepts that underpins all efforts to categorize what is. The supposedly ontological category of “place” provides a perhaps even more striking illustration of the difficulties raised by the application of the concept of generality to such a category: If “France” seems more general than “Nantes” and “Nantes” more general than “that street,” then is “place” more general than “France”? We might be tempted to think so, and yet “that street” is just as much a place as “France.” There is in fact no continuity

in this sort of hierarchy, and it is therefore not clear what makes “place” a more general notion than “France”: “I can certainly say that a street is the street of a city and that a city is the city of a country, but *not* in the same way that a country is the country of a place” (p. 117). It follows from this that “place” is not a substantial concept either.

This analysis highlights the confusion that lies at the root of most categorization efforts, thereby depriving of its foundation much of ontology.

## Abandoning Ontology

Motta’s critique also addresses the other aspect of the ontological enterprise: the general inquiry into the nature of being. His thesis strikes at the heart of this inquiry by showing that questions such as “What is an object?” or “What is an entity?” are in fact meaningless.

The ontological impulse leads us to view as substantial concepts what are in reality formal concepts, as if concepts could have meaning only by referring to objects. This confusion is particularly evident in the sometimes extraordinarily intricate debate about the “existence” or “reality” of fictional beings.<sup>7</sup> Quite often, the problem is framed in the terms of reference: While it is difficult to deny the existence of fictional names (for instance, it is quite obvious that the name “Sherlock Holmes” has existed since it was coined by Conan Doyle), the ontological debate focuses on the existence or type of reality of what is referred to by these names. Do fictional names refer to “something,” and if so, how can we characterize that something? The distinctions introduced by Motta lead to the conclusion that the problem is badly posed and therefore completely empty. As the author makes clear through a subtle analysis of concrete examples, ontologists fail to realize that fictional names behave in a way that is logically very different from the way real names behave. Fictional names are in fact not names at all, and they only appear to refer to individuals. Ontologies are unable to correctly identify the logical regime of these pseudo-names and are therefore frequently mobilized to account for the existence or reality of fictional beings, which is in reality a pseudo-problem.

---

<sup>7</sup> On this point, Motta takes particular aim at Kripke, for whom fictional entities exist because they are endowed with ontological reality. Kripke defended this position in his *John Locke Lectures*; see Saul Kripke, *Reference and Existence*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

It is actually the way most ontologies refer to the notion of “reality” itself that poses a problem. Drawing in particular on Austin,<sup>8</sup> Motta points out that the concept of “real” cannot be used more substantially than that of identity, which implies that the adjective is only relevant when accompanied by a noun, whatever it may be. While we can easily understand the statement “this is red,” we can hardly understand the statement “this is real” without knowing what is being discussed. We therefore cannot talk about “reality” without being more specific. Indeed, understanding the positive term requires understanding the negative one: The adjective “real” only has meaning insofar as it provides a contrast. The problem is that it is impossible to determine an absolute real on the basis of its negative. To use Motta’s example, a false fruit is a “true” false fruit and is therefore no less real – absolutely speaking – than an edible fruit. In fact, “there is no intelligible use of ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ alone, *i.e.*, without an accompanying noun” (p. 362). This does not at all mean that the word “real” is meaningless and that we should not use it at all; rather, it means that it is unintelligible as used in certain philosophical discourses that purport to grasp the totality of being.

It follows from all this that ontology is an enterprise that should be abandoned. Ontological controversies are sterile because we do not even really know “what is at stake and what is required for the conflict to be resolved” (p. 318). The ontological controversy amounts to a pseudo-debate “where 1) we do not understand the (supposedly) conflicting positions because 2) we do not understand the question and 3) we do not understand what is needed to understand the question” (p. 320). Ontology can therefore only give rise to a meaningless discourse that purports to answer apparent questions. In fact, the only valid answer to such questions is to free ourselves from them, that is, to liberate ourselves from the spell cast by grammatical confusion and the misunderstanding of the logic of language. This is what Wittgenstein—whose influence on Motta is obvious here—suggested when he wrote of philosophical questions: “We cannot answer such questions at all, but can only note their nonsensicality.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Despite a relatively small and posthumous body of work interrupted by a premature death, John Langshaw Austin (1911-1960) is one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. He was one of the promoters of the philosophy of ordinary language, which he developed in works such as *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1962) and in various articles. Contemporary philosophers return to Austin’s writings time and again because the analyses they contain render futile the sometimes scholastic developments that later analytic philosophy has ventured into.

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London, Routledge, 2001, proposition 4.003.

## Conclusion

Motta's work provides an excellent illustration of good philosophical style. Far from the grandstanding and oracular obscurity that have come to characterize the writing of too many philosophers, his argumentation is rigorous and meticulous, as clear as the technicality of the subject allows, supported by thoroughly analyzed examples, and very pleasant to read. The demonstration, which makes proper and expert use of the resources of logical analysis, is highly convincing and accessible. However, the perspective defended by Motta is not unprecedented, as critics of metaphysics located its source in the confusions of language long ago. While the spirit of the book is thoroughly Wittgensteinian, Motta also borrows important conceptual distinctions from Carnap, Austin, and Descombes, and continues, through the figures of Hobbes and Locke, the best of a tradition that goes back at least to the modern era. In this sense, the book is a valuable synthesis that effectively renews the critique of a field of philosophy whose current expansion resembles at times a speculative bubble.

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), 13 January 2022. Translated by Arianne Dorval, with the support of [Cairn.info](http://Cairn.info). Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), 26 November 2024