Each of these terms assumes a very particular meaning in phenomenology. Emptied out of their traditional meaning, they are fully redefined, in accordance to the teleological idea related to their corresponding disciplines, within the more general teleological idea of a theory of science. Finally, all these notions are to be grasped in an intuition of essences.

As for the expression “first philosophy,” Husserl claims that it should be freed from its traditional historical meaning so as to preserve only its strictly literal sense. The latter suffices already to indicate the leading theoretical intention of the discipline at stake:

In reviving the term in its Aristotelian sense, I derive from the fact that it has fallen out of common usage the highly welcome advantage that it arouses in us only its literal meaning, and not the various sediments of historical tradition, which, as the vague concepts of metaphysics, allow memories of the manifold metaphysical systems of earlier times to become confusedly intermingled with one another.

(Hua VII, 3)

Taken in the strictly literal sense, the expression dubs a certain “philosophy” as “first,” insofar as other philosophies (in particular “metaphysics” and “ontology” as Husserl understands them) appear as “second” to or “derived” from it, within the unity of philosophy itself. Thus, according to this literal sense, “first philosophy” is not “first” in worth or dignity, as if it

... carried within itself, as it were, the sancta sanctorum of philosophy, while the remaining “second” philosophies would only represent the necessary first steps, the antechamber as it were of such a holy place.

(Hua VII, 4)

First philosophy is “first” only with respect to the order of philosophy, which is governed by a distinctive teleological idea.

In the First Philosophy lectures (1923/1924), the title “first philosophy” goes to phenomenology itself as the scientific discipline of the beginnings: “I am convinced that, in the breakthrough of the new transcendental phenomenology, a first breakthrough of a true and genuine first philosophy has already been accomplished” (Hua VII, 6). The challenge of these
Ontology, metaphysics, first philosophy

lectures is thus to broaden this idea into a genuine “universal theory of science” (universale Wissenschaftslehre).

It is to be noted, however—and this is crucial—that phenomenology has not always been “first philosophy”. We can even date quite precisely the moment in which phenomenology turned into “first philosophy”. In the “Draft of a Preface to the Logical Investigations”, written in 1913, Husserl claims that, while having avoided the use of the term because of its bad reputation, he had first conceived phenomenology as something akin to a “rational psychology”. However, he also adds an important clarification:

Only much later (around 1908) the important insight was gained that a distinction between transcendental phenomenology and rational psychology has to be made which (…) is of the greatest significance for transcendental philosophy in the genuine sense and specifically for the role of phenomenology as the true “first” philosophy (wahre “erste” Philosophie).

(Husserl 1939, 337–338/59)

As a matter of fact, in Husserl’s published texts and lectures prior to 1908, phenomenology was never presented as “first philosophy”. Following a Neo-Kantian conception borrowed from Edouard von Hartmann, the title “first philosophy” was rather granted to “theory of knowledge”, while phenomenology was defined as “the universal science of pure consciousness” (Hua XXIV, 219/215).

As for “formal ontology”, the first time the expression appears in Husserl’s published texts is in Ideas I (1913). However, the idea was already present in the first volume of the Logical Investigations (1900) though under a different name, i.e. “pure theory of objects as such” (reine Theorie der Gegenstände als solcher). At the time, Husserl refused to take up the old word “ontology”, which was traditionally used to designate the “a priori science of what actually is”. Understood in this very specific sense, “ontology” had been—rightfully—banned from philosophy during the second half of the 19th century, thanks to the criticisms of Kantians and empiricists alike. But the “ontology” whose idea was renewed in the Logical Investigations did not have any historical tie to the metaphysical ontologies of the past. As Husserl puts it:

In my investigations [scil. my “old mathematical and logical investigations of the years 1886–1895”] the idea of ontology in a peculiar form was revived without any historical allusions and thereby also free from radical obscurities and errors which adhered to the old ontologies and which justified the opposition to them.

(Husserl 1939, 320/41; on the topic see Gérard 2010)

In what follows we will take the concept of “first philosophy” as a guiding thread and address two tightly related although different questions: (1) In what sense should philosophy be understood as “first” philosophy? Or, differently put, what is the meaning of such “primacy”? (2) To what extent could phenomenology legitimately claim the title of “first philosophy”? These two questions will eventually take us to specify the different meanings that the concepts of “metaphysics” and “ontology” acquire in the phenomenological tradition.

28.1. The primacy of philosophy

The question of whether phenomenology could rightfully claim to be first philosophy is related to the broader problem of the “primacy” of philosophy as such with respect to sciences. Is phi-
losophy somehow “prior” to each and every particular science? The answer clearly seems to be negative, as the “emancipation” of modern science from the authority of philosophy readily suggests. And this was all the more true at the beginning of the 20th century, when phenomenology was taking its first steps: if philosophy was certainly not dead, first philosophy definitively appeared to be on its deathbed.

**Husserl and the revival of first philosophy (1906–1907)**

Husserl was well aware of the historical process of emancipation of particular sciences with respect to philosophy. However, in his view, far from jeopardizing the project of first philosophy, such emancipation was precisely what made the realization of “first philosophy” possible—and even possible for the first time. Thus, in some sense, philosophy could not gain clear conscience of its role—or what Husserl took to be its role—and disclose itself, in an unprecedented way, as first philosophy, as long as sciences did not clearly turn away from philosophy itself.

So Husserl could write, in the lectures of *Introduction to Logic and Theory of Knowledge* of 1906–1907:

> It is in any case important to be made clear and to recognize that it is only destructive for philosophy to burden itself with theories belonging in the sphere of natural sciences. This segregation is the result of philosophy’s whole historical development […]. Only after breaking away from all natural theories does the philosophical task stand out in its purity.

*(Hua XXIV, 165/162–163)*

As long as sciences carried out in the natural attitude (syllogistic, sociology, psychology, etc.) were not capable of producing their own epistemology (or, as Husserl says, their own “methodology”); as long as they had to ask philosophy to do so, their separation from philosophy itself was neither necessary nor possible. Philosophy and sciences stood in the same plan: that of the natural attitude. And even when philosophy glanced at the transcendental perspective, it was only to close it up immediately, through a wrong-headed form of “transcendental realism”, bringing philosophy back to the natural attitude—as, for instance, in Descartes’s presupposition of geometry. This is how psychologistic (descriptive, genetic, even biologizing) or metaphysical theories of knowledge came about, unable to live up to the expectations of a genuine first philosophy.

But as soon as sciences developed their own “epistemology” or “methodology”, philosophy could finally open the space for a different form of discourse; always related to sciences but now standing “in a whole different plan” (*in einer ganz anderer Linie*). The theory of knowledge could achieve a first methodical step, i.e. the epoché, the suspension of judgment, which consisted in abstaining from using any knowledge given beforehand, letting all knowledge, as it were, suspended “up in the air”. But this first step also called for a second one—the phenomenological reduction, which did not add or take anything away from the system of knowledge, but delivered the world of phenomena.

Transcendental phenomenology had now other problems to face than the problems of theory of knowledge. And though not conceived to deal with such epistemological issues, it could still make its methods—almost accidentally—fruitful for the purposes of theory of knowledge. Supported by the new “universal science of pure consciousness”, the theory of knowledge could now fulfill its task and secure the ultimate foundations of the sciences.

In this cooperation, phenomenology thus presented itself merely as a servant: “Phenomenology occupies this useful position (*diese dienende Stellung*) not simply in relation to critique of knowl-
edge, but also in relation to the critique of practical and, in general, of axiological reason” (Hua XXIV, 217/213). But first philosophy, and sciences through it, would find in the “universal science of consciousness” a rather shrewd and quite troublesome servant.

It is to be noted that, according to Husserl, criticizing the so-called “metaphysical” theories of knowledge does not entail the exclusion of metaphysics from the edifice of the theory of science. Metaphysical questions are fully legitimate and ask for answers that sciences are unable to give. These are precisely the questions about the ultimate meaning of reality. Metaphysics is in fact redefined by Husserl, precisely, as the science of ultimate reality:

It suffices to see that above and beyond the merely relative sciences of Being, there must be a definitive science of Being that alone has to satisfy our highest, ultimate interests in Being, that has to investigate what has to be considered as Real in the ultimate, definitive sense. This radical science of Being, the science of Being in the absolute sense, is metaphysics.

(Hua XXIV, 99/96)

There is, then, in Husserl, a quite explicit metaphysical tendency in the theory of knowledge; and it is precisely such metaphysical tendency that will keep Husserl away—still for a couple of years—from simply identifying phenomenology as first philosophy.

Cavaillès’s critique (1942)

The most radical critique of such project of first philosophy came from outside the—strictly speaking—“phenomenological movement”. It was Jean Cavaillès, who, in a single shot, would somehow reshape the phenomenological movement itself, turn upside-down its apparently harmonious order, and redesign its borders.

Cavaillès was indeed (along with Emmanuel Lévinas, Gabriel Marcel and Alexandre Koyré) one of the representatives of the young generation of philosophers who attended Husserl’s conferences in Paris, in February 1929. Having received a scholarship from the Rockefeller Foundation, Cavaillès visited Germany several times, especially Freiburg, where he followed Husserl’s and Heidegger’s seminars. An important meeting with Husserl took place in 1931, in Saint-Märgen. Cavaillès left Saint-Märgen saddened and disappointed: “There is something a bit touching and a bit sad in his [sic. Husserl’s] pride”, he wrote to his sister:

he compares himself to Galileo and Descartes: “In fifty years, maybe in only a hundred years … I don’t want to overestimate it—one single philosophy will be studied: phenomenology. And all scientists will begin right there before their special works since, as universal wisdom (sagesse universelle), it should provide the foundations of all sciences. What has been done so far is, moreover, ludicrously small—but it is only a matter of time and patience”.

(quoted in Ferrières 2003, 107)

While Husserl’s 1906–1907 lectures equated “first philosophy” and “theory of knowledge”, in Formal and Transcendental Logic (1929) such primacy seems to belong, at least at first sight, to “formal logic”. A formal logic now clarified as the theory of apophantic judgments (formal apophantics) enlarged into a theory of deductive systems. Conceived in such a way, “formal apophantics” appears to settle everything which, by its form alone, is constitutive and determinant for a valid statement prior to any relation to a concrete object. Accordingly, as Cavaillès
puts it, logic would be nothing but first ontology: “Since knowledge of the object is expressed by judgments, [sic. formal apophantics] states the necessary preface to every knowledge, it is first ontology” (Cavaillès 1994, 530).

Such conclusion, however, should clearly be rejected. For, independently from all logical development, one should also acknowledge the existence of a spontaneous general ontology, namely “formal mathematics”, enlarged by Leibniz into a mathe
tis universalis, investigating the formal properties of any object whatsoever.

Such thematic separation between formal apophantics and formal ontology should not, however, conceal their innermost bond. In fact, according to Husserl’s theory of judgment, a judgment is nothing but the expression of a “state of affairs” (Sachverhalt). To put it differently, a judgment does not find its meaning and its justification immediately in itself, but in a relationship that is external and prior to it, which the judgment has the task to express. Such is the relation to something that is intended through the judgment itself as being “somewhere else”, as it were, “in another place”—the “place” of the world: “The primacy of the Sachverhalt is the primacy of the object” (Cavaillès 1994, 532).

Any act of judgment, whatever its syntactic transformations might be, is thus fundamentally oriented toward the object and, through it, toward the state of affairs in the world that it expresses. The manifold nominalizations, thanks to which one property or one part of a stated relation—that originally fall out of the thematic level—are ultimately thematized thanks to a higher-order reflection (for instance, plurality as property of plural judgments, singularity as property of singular judgments, etc.), cannot do without the constant objective polarization of the judgment itself, which remains unchanged all through the various modifications of thematic level.

What is at work here is something like a “principle of reducibility”, analogous to the axiom of reducibility in Russell’s ramified theory of types (see Russell 1908); a principle thanks to which all judgments are finally traced back to relations between primary objects, restoring the homogeneity among judgments of different levels.

Such principle of reducibility, however—pointing back to “ultimate substrata” (absolute subjects that are not, themselves, predicates or nominalized relations), “ultimate predicates”, or “ultimate relations”—is still not enough to bring us to the phenomenological ground. Only the reference to the “primacy of consciousness” could finally grant some unity to the movement of knowledge by which mathematics can be carried out in physics: “Consciousness is the totality of being” (Cavaillès 1994, 537–538). It is absolute being: “An absolute being is being in the form of an intentional life—which, no matter what else it may be intrinsically conscience of, is, at the same time, consciousness of itself” (Hua XVII, §103, 241/273 modified).

As a result, transcendental logic itself has to be the material logic of phenomenological science. But, if this is the case, what is the logic regulating the transcendental investigations themselves? Husserl stipulates that there is one single absolute logic setting the rules for the constitution of both constituted and constituting being. But, according to Cavaillès, this is clearly a way of “begging the issue”. Phenomenology ultimately finds itself before the following dilemma: “If transcendental logic is actually the foundation of logic, then there is no absolute logic (namely one that presides over absolute subjective activity). If there is an absolute logic, it cannot draw its authority but from itself, thus it is not transcendental” (Cavaillès 1994, 547; on the dilemma see Derrida 1990, 207–214/124–129).

From first philosophy to vagrant philosophy: Desanti (1975)

Jean-Toussaint Desanti belongs to that strand of French phenomenology described by Michel Foucault as moving not “in the direction of a philosophy of the subject, striving to radicalize
Husserl and soon running into the questions of *Sein und Zeit*” (as in Sartre’s *Transcendence of the Ego*), but “coming back to the founding problems of Husserl’s thought, those of formalism and intuitionism” (Foucault 1994, 764). A path that, as Foucault also rightly points out, was opened already “in 1938, by Cavaillès’s two theses on the Axiomatic Method and on the Formation of Set Theory” (Foucault 1994, 764). One could say, then, that on the basis of a distinctive reading of Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*, Desanti draws the most radical consequences of Cavaillès’s critique.

Transcendental phenomenology represents for Desanti the last historical attempt to “incorporate” or “interiorize” sciences within the philosophical discourse. Even if, from Plato to Husserl, the strategies to achieve such “interiorization” have been quite different (interiorization to the *eidos* in Plato, to the *intellectus* in Spinoza, to the subject in Kant, to the concept in Hegel, to consciousness in Husserl, etc.), the fundamental theme is always the same: “The implementation of an essential and first discourse, capable of setting up all the possibilities of knowledge and disclosing, in a single movement, its content and foundation” (Desanti 1975, 8).

Now, the strategies to “interiorize” sciences through the recourse of a transcendental consciousness entail specific risks and difficulties. And Desanti recognizes both the earnest of Husserl’s project and the risks that come with it.

The earnest of the project has to do with the way in which Husserl manages (for instance, in the first section of *Formal and Transcendental Logic*) to dive into its object—logical ideality—and describe it faithfully, according to his agenda of “returning back to the things themselves”. As for the risks, they appear already together with the *époché*, which, as we have seen, inaugurates the most distinctive philosophical moment of Husserl’s inquiry. What Husserl is looking for is, in fact, an opening path to implement, in a Cartesian style, a philosophy that is “free of presuppositions”. But should such freedom be understood?

According to Desanti, what is presupposed by those who live in presuppositions (be it mathematicians, philosophers or poets) is precisely knowledge (*savoir*), in its received positivity and showing itself in the following form: “there is meaning in what has already been said” (*il y a du sens dans ce qui s’est déjà dit*). Such meaning (*sens*), however, can be either the one embedded in the received true statements of science, or that of the imaginary, as it is conveyed in aesthetic productions, or even the one found in the belief laying at the core of the natural attitude. In short, “what is presupposed is the ‘always already there’ (*toujours déjà là*) of a non-mute experience (*expérience non-muette*), that takes out from itself, as it were, its forms of expressivity and, in doing so, elicits consent and refusal” (Desanti 1975, 73).

As for the beginning philosopher, he or she has neither to definitely give up nor refuse his or her consent. The philosopher simply suspends it, waiting for the moment in which he or she will summon, “before the court of his consciousness”, the neutralized, silenced experience. One recognizes here the influence of Gaston Bachelard and his critique of the purported mutism of experience:

> In the face of this ramification of epistemology, is there any justification for continuing to speak of a remote, opaque, monolithic, and irrational Reality? To do so is to overlook the fact that what science sees as real actually stands in a dialectical relationship with scientific reason. After centuries of dialogue between the World and the Spirit, it makes no more sense to speak of a mute experience.

*(Bachelard 1934, 8/12)*

Now, as Desanti maintains, there are many ways one could claim to be “free from presuppositions”. The first consists in tearing up the fabric of experience, as it were: “Such was, in his time,
Nietzsche’s brutality. And then we find ourselves before the mute abyss where all philosophical machineries burrow, and the sciences with them” (Desanti 1975, 73). The second is the path of cunning (ruse). Cunning does not tear anything apart; it only feigns and waits:

We need to stay “free” of every presupposition, without ever tearing up this fabric where all the presuppositions are chained. It is a fundamentally covetous approach, as it consists in setting up as guardian and holder of a thing whose price we refuse to pay, this price which we call “natural naïveness”.

(Desanti 1975, 73)

Such was, for example, the approach of Merleau-Ponty, of whom Desanti was a student at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, at the beginning of the 1930s, and who had made him discover phenomenology.

For Merleau-Ponty, indeed, phenomenology was precisely a way to “bring the pure and, in a way, still mute experience to the pure expression of its own significance” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 253–254/254–255). Yet, for Desanti, experience is never mute, or it is mute only as long as the philosopher has not spoken yet, i.e. as long as the primordial silence has not been broken by the philosopher’s originary speech.

This brings us to a first difficulty related to Husserl’s idea of a presuppositionless philosophy. The difficulty has to do with Husserl’s idea of an eidetic reduction, which is closely tied to the absolute époché. In fact, in order to be able to bring the still mute experience to the pure expression of its meaning, phenomenology needs to somehow “displace” it. For instance, if the phenomenologist wants to provide mathematics, provisionally affected by mutism, with foundations, he or she has to “displace” it and “relocate” it in the very place in which the phenomenologist dwells and is able to utter his or her authentic speech.

But mathematics does not let itself easily be displaced, for it always operates in its own field and in the double movement by which its object domains become always more general, and its own operations turn into theoretical objects (group theory, etc.). Mathematics is not an available totality, a form which would reveal itself. As a result, in order to “displace” it and turn it into a more manageable object, the phenomenologist has to put another object in its place. The name of such object is “formal ontology”. It is precisely with such a substitutive object that is, as it were, “phenomenologically tamed” (phénoméno-logiquement aprivoisé) (Desanti 1975, 107), that the phenomenologist ends up dealing.

The second difficulty is related to the circumvention of language, which is never reduced. The evidences carried out in the field of phenomenological consciousness require expression. And they can only be expressed in the natural language, according to the latter’s expressive possibilities. As a result, in one single blow, phenomenology settles into the field of the evidences of consciousness and into the field of the expressive possibilities of language (in which it can only operate the displacements of meaning judged necessary to the expression of evidences).

Against the positivism of the Vienna School, Merleau-Ponty wrote already that “in the silence of primary consciousness can be seen appearing not only what words mean, but also what things mean: the core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, X/XVII). Thus, phenomenology cannot but let itself be led by the structure of the semantic field proper to a natural language (langue): “The speech (parole) that exposes the phenomenon is forced to insert itself in a non-reduced system” (Desanti 1975, 76).

Hence Desanti’s assessment of the failure of Husserl’s project of a first philosophy and, more generally, of any attempt to “interiorize” sciences into the philosophical discourse:
Neither from the side of the Subject, nor from the side of the Concept, nor from that of Nature we find today a way to nourish or bring about a totalizing discourse. It is better to acknowledge it and refrain from engaging, on this ground, in an anachronistic rearguard action.

(Desanti 1975, 133)

It is worth noticing that the four forms of integration examined by Desanti are not the only ones. There are others. There are also philosophical discourses about sciences that are not totalizing and self-founding. Desanti mentions only two of them, without giving much explanation on this point: “It is quite clear, he writes, that our analyses could not be applied, for example, neither to Aristotle nor to Auguste Comte” (Desanti 1975, 67). Desanti explains elsewhere the reasons for such Aristotelian exception (Desanti 1975, 241–263). However, if the founding father of “first philosophy” is not affected by the critique of first philosophy in the Husserlian sense, i.e. as the science of the ultimate foundations of knowledge, it is first of all because he leaves mathematics outside the field of ontology. Resulting from a process of abstraction, mathematical beings are for Aristotle no longer per se intelligible and subsisting realities. Moreover, Aristotle’s logic was conceived as an autonomous discipline and his project was not to build a logical system capable of retrieving, in its own field, all the protocols of demonstration at work in the mathematics of his time, thus assuring their foundations. In short, Aristotle dismembered the beautiful Platonic totality of logic, mathematics and philosophy.

28.2. What kind of primacy?

_Critique of ontology, metaphysics of separation and ethics as first philosophy in Lévinas (1961)_

By its radicality and its way of practicing the absence of presuppositions, Lévinas’s thought has something of what we have called the “Nietzschean brutality”, tearing up the fabric of experience where the norms of science are always already incorporated.

As a matter of fact, Lévinas champions the idea of “a dislocation of the Greek logos: the dislocation of our identity, and perhaps of identity in general” (Derrida 1967, 122/102). Accordingly, he intends to break off with the dominant category of “totality”, which has long prevailed in Western philosophy. On this point, one could say that Lévinas takes up the philosophical heritage of Rosenzweig, whose _Star of Redemption_ (1921) denounced the Hegelian attempt of explaining the totality of reality by a single principle (the “Spirit”); a principle of which everything else should be understood as an expression. Thus, not unlike Rosenzweig, Lévinas is opposed to all enterprise of totalization a “new way of thinking”—a way of thinking in which the concept of Revelation plays a major role.

According to Lévinas, Western philosophy has been mostly understood as _ontology_, i.e. as the “reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension (intelligence) of Being” (Lévinas 1990, 33–34/43). In classical idealism such middle term was the concept. Correlatively, the concept of “knowledge” is not conceived as a way to respect Being in its alterity. It is rather “betrayal”, an action thanks to which an external being is held captive by a series of “intermediaries” (intermédiaires). Things are reduced to the same, and surrender, dominated through their conceptualization. The same holds for men. A man surrenders to another man, and through terror a free man falls into another man’s domination.
In Heidegger’s phenomenology, the mediation toward truth is accomplished by the Being of what exists. Truth about existing beings thus presupposes the previous opening of Being. Now, to affirm the priority of Being over existents is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with someone, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the Being of existing beings, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom.

(Lévinas 1990, 36/45)

In sum, Heidegger’s ontology asserts the primacy of freedom over justice—freedom consisting in standing ground against the Other and, in the relation with the latter, ensuring the autarchy of the Self. The “I think”, understood as an exercise of freedom, ultimately refers to the power of the “I can”, paving the way for the appropriation of what is and vouchsafing the exploitation of reality. Thus, as Lévinas (1990, 37/46) puts it, “Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power”.

But there is also another way to approach Being in theoretical terms. For ontology does not exhaust all the resources of theoretical thinking. In fact, “knowledge” (le savoir) or “theory” (la théorie) also mean—and maybe chiefly mean—“a relation with being such that the knowing being lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without marking it in any way whatever by this cognitive relation” (Lévinas 1990, 32/42). This way of relating to being while respecting his or her alterity is what Lévinas calls metaphysics.

Metaphysics is “theory understood as a respect for exteriority” (Lévinas 1990, 33/43), in contrast with ontology, that designates “theory as comprehension (intelligence) of beings”. Such relationship with being allows being to show itself in its alterity, is accomplished in what Lévinas calls the “metaphysical Desire”. Such metaphysical Desire has been constantly neglected by the philosophical tradition, or misunderstood as a form of “need” or “craving”, a desire originated by a certain lack which the possession of an object, or its appropriation in work, could eventually fill.

But our sexual, moral or religious needs, or even the need of love itself, are something entirely different from and not to be conflated with the metaphysical Desire. What they only share with the latter is the disappointment of the satisfaction and in the exasperation of the desire itself. But metaphysical Desire is transcendence, and transcendence as desire and inadequacy is, following a term borrowed from Jean Wahl (1944, 34–38/25–28) “transascendence”. Such radical transcendence points to a distance that is unlike any other distance. A distance that is not the distance of a term with respect to another, but enters into the way of existing of the exterior being: “Its formal characteristic—writes Lévinas—is to be other” and it is precisely such otherness that “makes its content”; an otherness with respect to which “the metaphysician is absolutely separated” (Lévinas 1990, 24/35).

But metaphysics also includes a critical aspect. An aspect thanks to which it escapes the limitations of theory and the naïve exercise of freedom, and reaches over its proper ethical dimension. Thanks to the critical import of metaphysics, theory itself, as intelligence of being, discovers what is dogmatic and arbitrary in ontological knowledge and in the blind exercise of freedom as forms of identifications of the Same thanks to the work of thinking. Thus, theory strives to come back to the very origin of the arbitrary dogmatism of ontology. But this would lead to an infinite regression if such “coming back” were to remain an ontological move and an exercise of freedom.

As a result, the critical intention that livens up theory ultimately leads theory beyond—or before—ontology. Theory is no longer the reduction of the Other to the Same (as in ontology),
but a way to call into question the exercise of the Same. A “calling into question” that could not be performed by the Same in its spontaneity, but can only carried out by the Other.

Lévinas calls “ethics” this “calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of an Other”. This metaphysics, conceived by Lévinas as transcendence, as reception of the Other by the Same, of Other by Myself, is then concretely understood as the calling into question of the Same by the Other, i.e. as ethics accomplishing the critical essence of knowledge: just as “as critique precedes dogmatism, metaphysics precedes ontology”.

From this new account of metaphysics follows that neither theology nor theory of knowledge could legitimately claim the title of “first philosophy”. Theology is not first philosophy, since the metaphysician is an atheist. The metaphysician’s atheism is the condition of a truthful relationship with a true God in itself—a relationship that is equally distant from both the objectivation of the religious as the lived participation in religion. The metaphysician’s atheism means positively that “our relation with the Metaphysical is an ethical behavior and is not theology, it is not a thematization—not even a knowledge by analogy—of the attributes of God” (Lévinas 1990, 76/78). Thus, Metaphysics takes place in social relations and, removed from the kinship with men, there can be no knowledge of God. But the primacy of ethics also means that “theory of knowledge” is no longer able to bring about the critical essence of knowledge, as Husserl and the Neo-Kantians believed. For the calling into question of objective knowledge cannot consist in addressing to knowledge itself the very same questions once addressed to understand the things intended by the naïve act of knowledge. To identify the problem of foundations with some form of “knowledge of knowledge” is to forget the arbitrariness of that freedom to which, precisely, we seek to find foundations.

A knowledge whose essence is critical cannot be achieved as knowledge of knowledge. It can only lead toward the Other—the one who calls my freedom into question.

Derrida’s critique (1964)


To begin with, Derrida claims, against Lévinas, that Heidegger’s idea of ontology, introduced in §3 of Sein und Zeit, “taken in its largest sense, unbent towards any ontological orientation or tendency”, has nothing to do with the traditional concept of ontology; nothing except a mere relation of homonymy. This is also confirmed by the fact that, after having tried to resume the ontological intention latent inside metaphysics, after having awakened the idea of “fundamental ontology” dormant under the traditional project of a metaphysical ontology, Heidegger finally abandons the terms “ontology” and “ontological”.

In his 1935 course, for instance, Einführung in die Metaphysik, Heidegger writes:

But since until now this question [of Being] has found neither an accord nor even a resonance, but instead it is explicitly rejected by the various circles of academic philosophical scholarship, which pursues an “ontology” in the traditional sense, it may be good in the future to forgo the use of the terms “ontology” and “ontological”.

(Heidegger 1952, 31/43–44)

Moreover, Heidegger also claims that the mode of thinking that “now addresses the question of the truth of being, and determines the essential sojourn (Aufenthalt) of man”, is no more an “ontology” than it is an “ethics” (Heidegger 1946, 42/259). Derrida concludes that “the question of Being is not submitted to any ontology” (Derrida 1967, 120/397 modified).
In addition to this, Derrida also discusses Lévinas’s claim according to which “the primacy of ontology for Heidegger does not rest on the truism: ‘to know the existent it is necessary to have comprehended the Being of the existent’”. Derrida understands Lévinas’s claim as if it meant that the primacy of Heidegger’s ontology did not rest only on this truism, but also on something else—namely on the subordination of justice to freedom: “Not only would the thought of the Being of the existent have the impoverished logic of the truism, but it escapes this poverty only in order to seize and to murder the Other” (Derrida 1967, 120/397). If this is the case, then the fact that such a “criminal platitude” is a truism should be the least of our worries.

Yet “truism” can be understood in two different ways. It can, at first, designate “faithfulness to truth” (truism, true, truth). In this case the claim Lévinas refers to is indeed a truism, but Heidegger would be right in founding his “thinking of being” on it. In fact, for Heidegger, the thought of being does not foster any theoretical or practical intention, no more than it intends to totalize theory or practice: “the deed of this thinking”, he writes in *Letter on Humanism*, “is neither theoretical nor practical, nor is it the conjunction of these two forms of behavior” (Heidegger 1946, 46/263). Now, this move of “going over above” or “under below” the opposition between theoretical and practical corresponds precisely, according to Derrida, to Lévinas’s approach in *Totality and Infinity*, where metaphysical transcendence is thought of as a not-yet-practical ethics.

But “truism” can also designate a tautology, an analytic judgment, the repetition of the subject as the predicate. In this case, the claim discussed by Lévinas is not a truism. Indeed, it is the least tautological of all claims, for it does not express a judgment at all; it does not have the form of a judicative proposition: it is an “ante-predicative” truth that founds every possible judgment, analytic or synthetic. The Being of an entity does not belong to the domain of predication, because it is implied in every predication and is that which allows for any predicative judgment. The Being of the entity is neither essence nor existence, neither being-there nor being-such, neither subject nor predicate.

One could certainly reply to Derrida that Heidegger’s backward movement toward Being, which precedes predication as well as the articulation between essence and existence (see, for instance, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*) is indeed “ontological”, though in a very particular sense. It would be “ontological” in the sense of Husserl’s second-level formal ontology, i.e. an ontology that is not concerned with the *eidos* object-in-general, but deals with the *eidos* world-in-general. And in this case, it would fall under the scope of Cavaillé’s critique, developed and detailed by Desanti (cf. section 28.1 above).

This brings us to the second part of Lévinas’s critique, according to which the relation to any entity (ethical relation) would be submitted to the relation to the Being of the entity (knowledge relation), while justice should not be subordinated to freedom. But Derrida maintains that one cannot speak of a “priority” of Being with respect to entities, since there cannot be an order of priority except between two determinate things, two entities. Now, since Being is nothing outside the entity, it could not precede it anyway, neither in time or dignity.

Accordingly, one cannot speak of a “subordination” of entities to Being, neither for the ethical nor for the ontological relation. For the only “oppressive neutrality” is that of the conceptual generality, of the principle. But Being is not a general concept, nor a principle to which the entity (the Other, for instance) could be subjected (subsumed, subordinated). Moreover, Lévinas himself had previously stressed this point in an earlier essay on Heidegger: “Precisely because Being is not an entity, it is not necessary to understand it per genus et differentiam specificam. The fact that, at each moment, we grasp its meaning proves that we can understand it in a whole different way” (Lévinas 1949, 47).
In sum, Derrida’s critique of Lévinas has shown that Heidegger’s question of Being is not “ontology”. But one should also add that it is neither a “first philosophy” nor a “philosophy of power”. In fact, “if every “philosophy”, every “metaphysics”, has always sought to determine the first existent, the excellent and truly existent, then the thought of the Being of the existent is not this metaphysics or first philosophy” (Derrida 1967, 200/171).

Jacques Rolland’s interpretation (1998)

Derrida’s article allowed for a better understanding of Heidegger’s question of Being with respect to Lévinas’s critique of ontology. But it also opened the space for a reassessment of Lévinas’s own positive account of “first philosophy”. The expression of such reassessment can be found in the attempt of clarification suggested by Jacques Rolland, in his Preface (1998) to Lévinas’s conference Ethics as first philosophy.

In Rolland’s account, the misunderstanding related to the idea of a priority of ontology over ethics in Heidegger seems to have breached the thesis of the primacy of ethics itself. Against Heidegger, Lévinas had in fact defined ethics as first philosophy. But since Derrida had shown that Heidegger’s thought was not a variety of ontology, there is no reason left to claim that ethics itself has to be first philosophy.

Ethics, according to Rolland, is in fact reluctant to play the role of first philosophy. If this were the case, it should be considered as “a ‘discipline of the beginnings’”, as suggested by Husserl in his reappraisal of Aristotle’s term. Accordingly, it would be “forced as such to oppose itself to another [first philosophy], i.e. the ‘ontology’ to which, in this case, [Heidegger’s] thought of being is violently reduced”, despite the fact that “Derrida has shown clearly enough (1963) that the latter is neither ontology nor first philosophy” (Rolland 1998, 44). Yet Lévinas—as clearly suggested by the very title of his 1982 conference—has nevertheless thought appropriate to take the title of “first philosophy” away from ontology and award it to ethics.

But did not Heidegger speak of “fundamental ontology” in Being and Time? And hadn’t he abandoned the terms “ontology” and “ontological” afterward? Then, in the same vein, Lévinas, after having talked of ethics as “first philosophy”, will progressively reject this way of speaking. As Rolland puts it, “it is to be noted, besides, that the term had totally disappeared from the lexicon of Autrement qu’être, and we would be surprised to see it return in 1982 before disappearing again—forever, as far as I can tell” (Rolland 1998, 45).

Jean-Luc Marion or the other first philosophy (1996, 2001)

The fact that phenomenology has renounced the position of first philosophy is the starting point of Marion’s own reflection on phenomenology; a reflection leading to the question of whether another first philosophy is possible.

Marion’s question finds its best expression in the text of a conference, held October 9, 1995 at UNESCO and published under the title “The Other First Philosophy and the Question of Givenness” (Marion 1996a). The original text of the conference was further expanded and developed and a second version (cf. the considerations “On the Use of Givenness in Theology”) appeared the same year (Marion 1996b), translated three years later into English. A third unmodified version was published as the opening chapter of In excess, under the new title “Phenomenology of givenness and first philosophy” (Marion 2001, 1–34/1–29).

In the first published version, Marion realizes that both Heidegger and Lévinas not only rejected the ontology of metaphysics, but also the idea of “first philosophy”, throwing away the
baby with the bathwater, as it were. Thus, if phenomenology wants to restore first philosophy, this could only be done in spite of and maybe even against Heidegger and Lévinas.

Didn’t Heidegger, who, more than any other, tried to disentangle phenomenology from metaphysics, also give up a claim to the title “first philosophy”? And if Lévinas brought to the fore the doubtfulness of ontology’s claim to fundamentality, he did not carry to the end his own claim to the title “first philosophy”, nor did he impose its renewal.

(Marion 1996a, 75; Marion 1996b, 37/790–791)

But this latter claim should be nuanced. For, as Marion puts it, it seems to be at odds with the repeated usage of the expression by Lévinas himself: “Despite the title of the collection *Emmanuel Lévinas: L’éthique comme philosophie première*, ed. Jean Greisch and Jacques Rolland (Paris, 1993), I remain more hesitant about Lévinas’ uses of this phrase” (Marion 1996a, 75; Marion 1996b, 37/791).

The hesitation will disappear in the version of the text published in *In excess* (2001), where, under the influence of Jean Greisch, Marion will recognize Lévinas as an exceptional figure in French philosophy and an example to be followed: “Lévinas, in his own way, explicitly took up Husserl’s claim. For, while directly questioning ontology’s fundamental dignity, or rather to threaten it even more, he finished his demonstration in these terms: ‘Moral is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy’” (Marion 2001, 17). Lévinas’s example—after Husserl’s—shows us, then, that there is no intrinsic incompatibility between phenomenology and first philosophy.

Thus, the key question for Marion is not to establish whether philosophy can still legitimately claim the title of first philosophy. The question is settled from the outset: if philosophy were not to claim such primacy, it would deteriorate to the rows of “derived” and “second” sciences and renounce itself.

The critique of the philosophies of consciousness (Kant and Husserl) put forth by Cavaillé and, more generally, the critique of the forms of interiorization of sciences in philosophical discourse, prompted by Desanti, are thus utterly ignored. Marion dismisses them at once for being “ideological” (2001, 17/15). Moreover, the alternative forms of “philosophies” that they propose are nothing but symptoms of the degeneration of thought in times of nihilism and end of metaphysics. “Epistemology”, trying to establish itself, in the wake of sciences, as a “second-order knowledge”, and “analytic philosophy”, trying to establish itself as a mere “survey of forms of the correct use of language”, not only renounce first philosophy. They also renounce philosophy as such (2001, 17/15).

Hence the shift in the question: one should not be concerned with the question of whether first philosophy remains conceivable. One should rather try to find out which kind of primacy could actually be assumed.

Now, metaphysics can no longer be of any use for first philosophy. It has come, down this path, to exhaust its own possibilities, for every attempt to determine some “metaphysical” kind of primacy has been historically disqualified. Philosophy can no longer guarantee its primacy through the primacy of the *ousia* (see Aristotle’s *Met.* E 1), for the concept of substance has been subject to Descartes’s, Kant’s and Nietzsche’s critiques: substance remains unknown, except in its epistemological dependence with respect to its attributes and accidents. Moreover, it also turns into a category of understanding whose validity is limited only to phenomena, that is to say, limited to precisely that which, in Aristotle, was a matter of overcoming. As a result, all that Nietzsche had to do was to get rid of it once and for all, just as he did with any other metaphysical idol.
But philosophy can no longer rest on its primacy over that of *causa*, the object of *prima philosophia* according to Aquinas—distinguished both from the science of the divine (*theologia*), and the science of the entity (*metaphysica* in the strict sense, which will result in *ontologia*). For the concept of cause, in turn, has to “find shelter” out of the things themselves, and take its place between the concepts of the understanding, whose transcendental usage, beyond the limits of experience, is supposed to be illegitimate. Not only can this concept no longer reach the divine, it is not even capable of raising any primacy at all, since Descartes has shown the possibility of reversing the priority between the cause that “explains” and the effect that “proves it” (*Discours de la méthode*, VI).

Finally, philosophy can no longer earn its primacy on the noetic primacy of consciousness, as in Descartes and Kant (and, one could add, in Husserl himself). For the relocation of primacy to the only noetic instance rests entirely on the primacy of a transcendental I, purified of every empiricity, incapable of individualizing itself in time and space, and unable to open itself to the Other.

What is left, then—following the examples of Husserl and Lévinas—is the task to explore the possibilities of phenomenology as a *new way to be first philosophy*, for phenomenology is deemed to be external to metaphysics and its history. But in order to avoid any metaphysical form of first philosophy, phenomenology has to provide a new principle: “as much reduction, as much givenness”. The given phenomenon holds in itself, with the experience of its givenness, the experience of its certitude. The given is indubitable: for either we consider it as given and, whatever its mode of givenness might be (sensible intuition, imagination, vision of essences, etc.), it is always well given; or we experience a disappointment in it, but that simply means that, because of a lacking of reduction, we took for given what did not authentically give itself, actually giving itself in a different mode not yet distinguished in its specificity.

It follows that there is no exception to givenness, not even nothing, death or absence, which always designate a “specific absent” and makes it appear for me as such. The principle of phenomenology has, then, nothing to do with a foundation or a first principle. It consists rather in a final principle, in that it awards priority to the phenomenon: “The last principle takes the lead to hand it over to the phenomenon” (Marion 2001, 30/27).

References


Vincent Gérard


