

A Study in Comparative Ontologies: Root Metaphors of Existence

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Ontology is not as obvious a field of study as is theology; the mere mention of ontology spontaneously connotes some esoteric branch of philosophy long since denounced as speculative nonsense. But such quick denunciations of ontology are not only misleading, they are also lacking in imagination. This brief essay represents a comparative study of ontology. It examines formal ontology and presents examples of formal ontologies; second, it clarifies a general distinction between strong and weak ontologies; third it focuses on existential ontologies, specifically situating this shift to existential ontologies within the context of the Heideggerian distinction between the ontic and the ontological; and finally, it offers two cases of Africana ontologies: one African American and the other Afro-Caribbean. The conclusion or, rather, thrust, of the essay is to recommend greater investigation of existential ontologies in order to counter the hegemonic project of globalizing the barren ontology of political liberalism.

I: Formal Ontology

We can conservatively start by identifying formal ontology as the study of the essential features of being in itself - being construed as a thing, a substance or an object. Ontology, thus construed, is not the study of any particular thing or individual. Rather, formal ontology is an investigation into the fundamental categories of being. From another context we can expand upon the preceding view and define ontology as the formal science of what is, more specifically, an inquiry into the nature of reality such that for every area of reality we seek to identify the kinds of objects, the structures of the objects, and the properties and relations characteristic of reality.

Let briefly examine examples of formal ontologists. Linguistic constructivists, such as Quine, seek to answer the question of what we must be committed to as existing in order for sentences to be true. Indeed, the main concern of linguistic constructivists is to reveal the ontological commitments entrenched in different kinds of language. Linguistic constructivists, however, maintain that natural language is referentially opaque and, hence, argues that ontological commitments can be obtained only by paraphrasing them into a canonical language such as first-order predicate logic. Here language use determines our ontological commitments.

Ontological reconstructivists, unlike linguistic constructivists, take the ontological commitments of natural language at face value; however, they consider natural language metaphysically deceptive. Ontological reconstructivists maintain that natural language commits us to an ontology of chairs; however, metaphysically chairs are not what we think they are.

Finally ontological realists court no reconstructivist agenda, for they do not acknowledge any need for reconstruction, whether ontological or metaphysical. Ordinary language,

they maintain, is in good ontological order and, so, there is no need for any technical ontological reconstruction.

Length constraints does not allow for any extended and detailed analysis of formal ontology. But it should be noted that the program of formal ontology must face the insurmountable challenge of contestability precisely because of the assumption of digitality, the idea that concepts have clear and sharp boundaries and the additional assumption that concept substitution can take place while preserving the truth value of sentences.¹

II: Strong and Weak Ontologies

There is another significant distinction with regard to ontology that although not directly rooted in the concerns of formal ontology is nevertheless motivated by that project. Some thinkers have distinguished between strong and weak ontologies. “Strong [ontologies] are those ontologies that claim to reflect for us ‘the way the world,’ or how God’s being stands to human being, or what human nature is. For strong ontologies, the whole question of passages from ontological truths to moral-political ones is relatively clear.”² Strong ontologies are foundational in that they court or rather embrace the idea of there being metaphysically, secured transcendental grounds or universal truths to legislate politics and ethics.

Weak ontologies eschew the attraction of foundationalism and resist any infatuation with the existence of transcendental truths to underwrite politics and ethics. Rather, weak ontologies are interpretive-existential constructs. “Weak ontologies are ... not rooted in a crystalline conviction of ultimate cognitive truth. Rather, [...] they are interpretations of the world. They are contestable pictures with a validity claim that is two dimensional. [Weak] [o]ntologies provide a framework of meaning for basic existential realities such as natality, language, and finitude. [W]eak ontologies might be characterized as the most basic frames we use both to access *and* construct ourselves and the world.”³ Clearly, then, weak ontologies are metaphorical or analogical pictures human beings utilize to constitute the conditions of the possibility of self-fashioning and world-construction. Weak ontologies are best characterized as existential ontologies. Now that we have been familiarized with the formal study of ontology, let us turn to examine the more recent radical philosophical rethinking of ontology from the perspective of existential phenomenology.

¹ For a important criticism of formalism see, Brian Cantwell Smith, *On the Origin of Objects* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996).

² Stephen White, “Weak Ontology and Liberal Political Reflection”, *Political Theory*, Volume 25, Number 4 (August, 1997), p. 505.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 506.

III: Existential Phenomenology: Difference Between the Ontic and the Ontological

Heidegger's approach to ontology represents a radical displacing of traditional formal ontology. Indeed, Heidegger deplores the substance metaphysics of traditional Western philosophy, the tendency to think of Being as an entity. For him, Being is not an entity, a substance or a particular thing; nor is it an aggregate of particulars. Rather, being claims ontological priority over particular beings; it is the background that facilitates the appearance of beings. Heidegger's revolutionary turn calls for an existential phenomenological approach to the study of being. Investigations into being, according to this view, must be concrete, implying that any plausible approach to Being must begin with that being for whom its being is a question, the being who, in other words, asks question about the meaning of Being; it follows that human beings must be the starting point for inquiry into Being. Accordingly, ontology for Heidegger becomes what he calls fundamental ontology, which roughly means that we can only understand Being through an understanding of human being or what Heidegger calls, Dasein. Heidegger maintains that an investigation of the basic existential modes of the being of human beings or human-being-in-the-world prepares "the way for the problematic of fundamental ontology -the question of the meaning of Being in general."⁴

With Heidegger we have a revolutionary distinction between the ontic and the ontological. The ontic is restricted to the study of the nature of beings. The ontological, however, pertains to the ways of being or rather to the question of Being. The ontological is more closely connected to the existential understanding of being precisely because it is a hermeneutical understanding of the ontological structures of existence. And since we are told that the question of Being is best approached from the concrete standpoint of the human being, ontology becomes the study or interpretation of the plural meanings in which human beings exist. Ontology is transformed into an inquiry into the problems of human existence.

If ontology in its new existential phenomenological guise studies or interprets human-being-in-the-world, it would seem then that the Heideggerian attempt to develop an analytic of existence would facilitate ontological drift, meaning that instead of pursuing a universal ontology, we can more constructively consider particular ontologies or specific ontologies that would be emergent from different styles of existence. Indeed, Levinas has registered his disapproval of Heidegger's emphasis on ontology. According to Levinas, despite his radical deconstruction of the philosophical tradition, Heidegger ironically is still imprisoned within this tradition to the extent that he privileges ontology over ethics. The Levinasian focus on ethics as first philosophy would seem to qualify as a more radical gesture to the idea of existential ontology by way of working through difference and otherness. So, the move from formal ontology – hegemony – to fundamental ontology ends in existential ontology and heteronomy, namely to the acknowledgment of there being different ontological structures of human existence, in other words, plural forms of being.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 227.

The more radicalized pronouncement of ontology is to found in the work of Foucault. Foucault in his essay “What is Enlightenment?”⁵ referred to what he calls “the historical ontology of ourselves.” He indicated that historical ontology would be the kind of study concerned with “truth through which we constitute ourselves as objects of knowledge.” Historical ontology would also assume the burden of studying power, which, according to Foucault would be the “power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others.” Finally, historical ontology would also study the “ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents.” Clearly historical ontology would be the kind of study that is existentially projected precisely because it concerns the various practices through which human beings constitutes themselves as objects of knowledge, subjects of power and moral agents.

This new understanding of ontology in the guise of existential ontology, the study of the plural forms of human existence, certainly conflicts with the project of the coloniality of being. The coloniality of being is the modern project by which the West seeks to promote its particular mode of being, its own parochial form of life, its myopic particularism to the status of universality. This ontological imperialism in the form of the Western colonialization of being unsettles ways of being not immediately supportive of the Western order of consciousness. But a fundamental problem with the project of ontological colonization is the obscuring of existential ontology. For the modern Western project, in the form of political theory, has embraced a strong ontology which takes the form of the social application of formal ontology. The end result is the unacknowledged ontological nihilism regarding the ontology of everyday life. Modern political liberalism has extended to us “a picture of selves as essentially ‘possessive individualists’ whose essential connection to others is constituted instrumentally in terms of self-interest.”⁶ Society is nothing but an aggregate of self-interested individuals who interact on the social plane of everyday life like material objects caught in the swirl of a mechanical choreography patterned to the rhythm of physical forces. The sacrifice of social particularity in exchange for abstract individualism robs individuals of the rich existential ontological standpoint that would have better orient their being in the world. The attempt to ground politics and ethics in transcendental fictions, and not metaphorical and analogical interpretive structures that are more conducive to the flourishing of robust conceptions of selfhood, is a repudiation of existential ontology. Indeed, it is this flight from concrete existence and the complicit notion of formal ontology that Fanon correctly observed as a danger to black existence. Fanon maintains that “In the [world-view] of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation. Someone may object that this is the case with every individual, but such an objection merely conceals a basic problem. Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.”⁷

⁵ Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 508.

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), pp. 109-110.

IV: Africana Existential Ontologies

Against this modernist tendency to separate the self from social particularity and house it in the opaqueness of an abstract transcendental universality, I want to make the case that Africana ontologies, namely Africana existential ontologies, are more inclined to support a poetics of existence. Here, I will be looking at the blues as an ontology of life, as well as rum as an ontology of life. These ontologies of life are obviously metaphorical ways to interpret ontological structures of black existence. Let us see how Africana ontologies subvert the strong ontology of political modernism by examining Ralph Ellison's idea of the blues as an ontology of life.

Haunted by persistent historical structures of nonbeing as well as cruel invisibility, with the despair, social anxiety and absurdity characteristic of such unimaginable treatment, African Americans became masters of the heroic affirmation of life. This existential affirmation of life, even when confronted with threats and assaults against their being, assumed several manifestations in African American culture. Perhaps the most intriguing manifestation of this heroic affirmation is the blues. Ralph Ellison has championed the idea that the blues can serve as a metaphor for human existence; the idea of a blues ontology, a philosophy of life grounded in the complexities of improvisation. The existential thrust of the blues suggests the idea of rolling with the punches, knowing that life is not always easy but that despite the desperation of less than perfect situations, there is always the potential of overcoming, of finding a way to work things out. Ellison describes the blues in the following existentialist grammar. He writes:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged edge and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically....⁸

It is not difficult to tease from Ellison's remarks his keen appreciation for the importance of understanding that the freedom of the individual is not some mechanical option one can call upon when things go wrong. Rather, transcending and expressing our freedom is a matter of working through the horrible details of tragic situations only to emerge more resilient as we ready ourselves for future challenges to our temporary episodes of existential comfort. Albert Murray expands Ellison's take on the blues in the following manner. According to Murray:

In a sense the whole point of the blues idiom lyric is to state the facts of life. Not unlike ancient tragedy, it would have the people form whom it is

⁸ Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), pp. 78-79.

composed and performed confront, acknowledge, and proceed in spite of, and even in terms of, the ugliness and meanness inherent in the human condition. It is thus a device for making the best of a bad situation.

Not by rendering capitulation tolerable, however, and certainly not by consoling those who would compromise their integrity, but-in its orientation to continuity in the face of adversity and absurdity....

There is also the candid acknowledgement and sober acceptance of adversity as an inescapable condition of human existence-and perhaps in consequence an affirmation disposition towards all obstacles.⁹

In another context Murray writes that the blues deals “with the most fundamental of all existential imperatives: affirmation, which is to say, reaffirmation and continuity in the face of adversity.”¹⁰ The notion of the blues as an ontology of life can be formulated as a three-step process. According to Craig Werner, “The process consists of (1) fingering the jagged grain of your brutal experience; (2) finding a near-tragic, near-comic voice to express that experience; and (3) reaffirming your existence.”¹¹

We can similarly designate Caribbean society as an existential space sustaining the mode of the Caribbean-being-in-the-world.¹² The Caribbean mode of being need not be limited to the plantation ontology of slavery. Consistent with the general thrust of Africana ontologies as poetics of existence I want to suggest that, like the blues, rum can transcend its categorical assignment and, similarly, also serve as an ontology of life.

The idea of rum as an ontology of life would appear to many as preposterous, bordering on the absurd.¹³ The close relation between rum and slavery, and even the current social and psychological cost of the abuse of rum, certainly would seem to qualify rum to be, if any thing, in violation of the very thrust of life and survival. However, despite these unfortunate liabilities we should not be too quick to denounce rum as the demon drink without working through the complex history of rum in the modern world, as well as it

⁹ Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973), pp. 36-37, 106-107.

¹⁰ Quoted in Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & The Soul of America* (Plume: New York, 1999), p. 70.

¹¹ Craig Werner, *A Chance is Gonna Come: Music, Race & The Soul of America* (Plume: New York, 1999), p. 69.

¹² One interesting essay on the idea of a Caribbean ontology is Holger Henke, “Towards an Ontology of Caribbean Existence,” *Social Epistemology* (January-March, 1997), p. 39-58.

¹³ Two recent histories of rum have appeared, which document its dominance in the development of the New World, see, Charles Coulombe, *Rum: The Epic Story of the Drink that Conquered the World* (Kensington Publishing : New York, 2004) and Ian Williams, *Rum: A Social and Sociable History of the Real Spirit of 1776* (Nation Books: New York, 2005).

complex integration into the existence of Caribbean peoples. Hence, instead of locating the phenomenon of rum within an identity logic and then denounce discursive efforts to thematize and place rum within cultural space, it would be more productive to appeal to the dialectics of rum and, consequently, treats its apparent contradictory characteristics as constituting an identity of difference and not necessarily the entropy of absolute oppositions.

We can start by first acknowledging the role of rum in generating a strategically, shared space within Caribbean societies, as well as among Caribbean societies. It is not that rum literally eliminates differences but, rather, it serves as a metaphorical basis for negotiating or transcending internal differences of political, social and cultural power. It is over a bottle of rum that people from different social and cultural spheres come together to participate in the ritual of drinking, a shared experience as well as a basis for further social interaction. In transcending differences of power of social status, a basis is provided for human connection and understanding across differences that would otherwise prohibit the possibility of mutual understanding. In short, then, rum allows for face-to face encounters that facilitates the leveling of social distinctions.

Second, the rum ontology can function as a analytical construction to manage differences of language, history and cultural influence among the different societies of the Caribbean. As Ian Williams writes in his recent history of rum, “rum is the one common factor of a recognizable common Caribbean culture. The Dutch-, English-, French-, and Spanish-speaking islands have separate strands of culture, and even within the different language blacks, the islands are similar but distinct. One each island, the scars of slavery manifest themselves in different ways. But on all of them, islanders make, drink, and relish ... rum¹⁴

We can also talk terms of an ethics of rum. First we should note that rum drinking is often a communal affair, meaning that the ritual of drinking rum is not something done privately. There is no privacy of rum in the sense that individualistic consumption of rum is not socially sanctioned. Such behavior violates the communitarian ethics of rum. Furthermore, insistence on the private consumption of rum may be an indication of the weakness of the will, evidence of psychological or existential malfunctioning. Of course this should not be interpreted as romanticizing rum, as implying that all are welcome to the fellowship of rum drinking. If the ritual of rum drinking does not sanction private consumption, an action that would be judged as selfish, an action indicative of a more deeply distorted moral character, it should be noted that an individual can be excluded from the fellowship of rum drinking because he/she has breached social norms.

Furthermore, rum as an ontology of life makes possible the diagnosing of clinical problems rooted in social and cultural spheres. The abuse of rum may very well be considered the violation of a social ethics. This violation can in turn function as evidence to confirm that an individual is not appropriately ontological synchronized. One is

¹⁴ Ian Williams, *Rum: A Social and Sociable History of the Real Spirit of 1776* (Nation Books: New York, 2005), p xv.

ontologically synchronized to the extent that he or she can constructive participate in a form of life and is able to resolve problems that emerge within the context of that form of life. The inability to resolve internal contradictions within a form of life or to find interpretive and narrative schemes to deal with problematic situation may lead an individual to seek comfort in the abuse of rum. But here the abuse of rum does not entail any sinister conclusion about rum but rather about a break down the coping strategies of an individual.

Rum seems also to qualify as a metaphor of life precisely because of its almost “universal” relevance to birth, life and the dead. We drink rum to celebrate the birth of a child, we drink rum in celebration of life’s joys, as well as to transcend the ordinary notions of space and time as we enjoy festivals of song of dance with the living and, finally, we drink rum to conjure up the spirits of the ancestors. We offer rum as libations to summon the ancestors in our existential struggles; we offer rum as the appropriate complement to secure such crucial assistance. Hence the power of rum to connect the circuit of being: the new-born, the living, and the dead. We should note that despite the uses of other beverages for ritual purposes, rum claims more existential ontological relevance in the role it plays within the circle of being. According to Williams, “Unlike whiskey, tequila, Cognac, gin, or vodka, rum is more than just a beverage, having spiritual as well as spirituous connotations. The ‘demon rum’ of ... evangelists is also the preferred drink of the gods of Haitian Voodoo ceremonies, where it provides a potent and palatable alternative to holy water.”¹⁵

Finally, rum encourages certain existential epistemological insights about social reality. Whether we refer to rum as madness or as a demon, rum has certain transcending powers. In other words, rum seemingly possesses a seductive quality to induce altered states of consciousness, a spiritual intoxication, whereby individuals escape mundane everyday consciousness. In this rum-induced mystical state, one can witness a purity of experience, encounter experience beyond the differentiations provided by socio-cultural world, differentiations that have a tendency to masquerade as absolute and final. Rum can lead us to experience the distinctionlessness and undifferentiation of the stream of pure experience.

V: Conclusion

To conclude, I do not want to be interpreted as suggesting a cheap relativism that sanctions the idea that if there are many different existential ontologies, then no one existential ontology is better than another. Of course, one can raise the question of whether human socio-cultural reality is characterized by a single fundamental ontology or are existential ontologies cultural specific? From the perspective of Africana philosophy we need to reject the either/or logic of this question. We similarly need to reject imperial ontologies that would insist on the existence of a global ontology of human existence. Africana ontologies, such as those inspired by the blues or rum, remind us about the importance of avoiding ontological blindness; but they also indicate to us how we can

¹⁵ Ibid., p. xvi.

avoid such blindness by realizing the plurality of styles of human existence. No group has a monopoly on human existence or possesses the final and comprehensive way of being. If conflict and uncertainty are irreducible facts of human existence, then we must be ready to reevaluate, revise and remake our being-in-the-world and avoid mediocre and conventional ways of being that all too often threaten to mechanize or render opaque our being-in-the-world. Existential ontology hence needs to be more adequately foregrounded in our philosophical activities.