

The Problem of Being in the Middle Ages: An Essay on Medieval History of Being

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ABSTRACT. The main question of this paper is whether, and if yes – how, is it possible to speak about the history of being in the Middle Ages? Heidegger’s writings suggest that indeed it is possible, and said history can be outlined with the help of the concept of production. However, one cannot escape the rightful feeling that there is more to this epoch of being than it is suggested. There is a doubt whether Heidegger himself went far enough in deconstructing the Medieval epoch of being. Thus, the second part of the paper presents an endeavor of describing the problem of being in the Middle Ages, using Jan A. Aertsen’s distinctions and insights.

Keywords: problem of being, medieval ontology, metaphysics, production, transcendence.

1. Preliminary remarks

The premise of this paper is the following: *Es gibt Sein*, and consequently there is a philosophical problem of being. The number of books stored on many bookshelves, and studies, articles in journals, all kinds of contributions to this subject confirm its persistency, and for some mayhap – its urgency. The various titles carry the mixture of sameness and difference: Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, Aubenque’s *Le problème de l’être chez Aristote*, Brentano’s *On the several senses of being in Aristotle*, Blanchette’s *Philosophy of Being*, and so many others. Since there are little to no titles of a particular kind, we will ask whether it is possible at all to have, as a subject of pertinent research, the problem of being in the Middle Ages, or is it too general, too vast and undetermined

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so that it, consequently, fails to meet the requirements of a 'subject'? In answering this question, the first step is to explain the problem regarding the history of being, since it touches on the historical representation of said problem.

Not uncommonly proximity can be the cause of obscurity, and thus, that which is closer is in fact further from being understood precisely because it looks familiar. In this case, the task of philosophy is elucidation through distancing something out to the light of understanding, making it visible, as in the case of farsightedness by removing the object from the close range. The term 'history of being', *du jour* especially among contemporary continental ontology, is of such kind. Quite similarly with its closely related sibling-concept 'problem of being', no part of it is free from ambiguities and problems. How is 'history' meant to be conceived? - As a 'systematization' and 'putting something in order', as Greek etymology suggests, or as a mere chronology or doxography, as this word is commonly understood? Furthermore, what is to be grasped by the idea of genitive present in the preposition 'of': the *Genitivus Subjectivus* or *Objectivus*? - Is 'being' the object of the said history or its subject? Depending on the interpretation two different philosophies arise. If 'being' is the object of either, the systematization or the chronology, then the resulting narrative could be called conceptualist or nominalist. Meaning that there is a concept which is understood differently in different epochs, and this is the subject of investigation. On the other hand, if 'being' is the subject, then nothing is to be excluded: from a realistic point of view where 'being' stand for a reality which has its own history, to the super-realistic representation of a willful Being, beyond the reality, that generates and possesses the said history, as its author and actor, up to any quasi-religious representations where 'Being' is a divine name, a substitute name for that of conceived and praised 'Entity'. As to the third element of the term at hand - any kind of emphasizing is hardly needed, for one never escapes the awe, the fear and trembling, should one attempt to raise the question: what is being, or what its meaning is. *Prima facie*, being is either a verb and thus an action (an event, or process), or a noun and thus a thing, or put it better, "anything which is real, from a stone to an impression, from a colour to a certain place in the universe, is a being. Being is not one class of things: all things, whatever class they belong to, are beings."¹ This is the context in which Etienne Gilson's reference to 'fundamental ambiguity of the notion of being' could be understood: "In a first acceptance, the word being is a noun. As such, it signifies either a being (that is, the substance, nature, and essence of anything existent), or being itself, a property common to all that which can rightly be said to be. In a second acceptance, (...) the present participle of the verb 'to be.' As a verb it signifies (...) the very act whereby any given reality actually is, or exists.

¹ Leo J. Elders, *The Metaphysics of Being of St. Thomas Aquinas in a Historical Perspective*, Brill, 1993, p. 33.

Let us call this act a ‘to be’, in contradistinction to what is commonly called ‘a being’.”² Or, alternatively, one may refer to these acceptances as to nominal and verbal senses of being. Any further elaborations of this dangerously wide subject, notoriously devoid of clear means of navigation, will be subjugated to the aims and ends of the present paper, which shall be stated in the following lines.

2. Defining the object of the present work

The subject of this work is to investigate a precise episode of the history of being, already anticipated in the introductory lines – the Middle Ages. The scarcity of investigations accompanied by abundance of sources, upon which one could found said investigations, is what determines us to embrace this endeavor. Collaterally, this work aims to touch on the problem of meaning and of the possibility of such history.

In what follows, the term ‘being’ will be taken as a philosophical concept, the object of the homonymous problem. Hence, the history thus unraveled will be a history of a concept. The problem of the referent of this concept – marvelously expressed by Plato, in the lines: “Then since we are in perplexity, do you tell us plainly what you wish to designate when you say “being.”³ – will remain outside of this work’s limits, since it is a matter to be treated in a separate (and rather lengthy) work.

While trying to answer the main question that we have already raised in the opening of this paper, regarding the feasibility of history of being in the Middle Ages as the object of research, we will be guided by the following second level questions: is it possible to identify some general lines along which this concept was conceived during the Middle Ages, and if so, how precisely has it been done? Can we identify some special kind of concepts, by means of which one could sum up concisely, synthetically, and most importantly – altering, corrupting, and misrepresenting as little as possible – the ontological thought in the Middle Ages. We will call such kind of concepts - ‘pivotal concepts’, intending a prior, more general concepts, by means of which another concept, that of being in our case, is conceived, and by means of which a continuous act of conceptualization characteristic to a certain individuals, of the Middle Ages in our case, can be narrated.

There are great many notorious problems associated with the concept of being, of which we would like to underline the one touching its simplicity, generality and confusedness, the problem which can be summed up in the next formula: meaning anything whatsoever it means nothing rigorous, nothing practical, making this concept obsolete. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that it is one of the

² Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952, pp. 3-4.

³ Plato, *Sophist*, (transl. by Harold N. Fowler), Harvard University Press, 1921, 244a.

oldest concepts and problems of philosophy, and one of the most fascinating, at that. The aim of this paper is thus to understand how medieval thinkers thought about being. Is there something special, or at least characteristic, about medieval ontology?

3. The history of being in the Middle Ages according to Martin Heidegger

For the first part of this investigation, we will inquire into two of Heidegger's texts: *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* and *Metaphysics as History of Being*. The choice of the second text is obvious, and if it is not so for the former, we will specify that it also bears a fragment of the history of being, not only *per se*, but also pertaining to Middle Ages. Certainly, one does not easily refer, at the same time, to works after and before the *Kehre*. Nevertheless, it isn't the unity of Heidegger's thought that is under investigation now, but the history of being. Hence, the unity of the subject will guarantee the validity of nearing the two works.

The area of the philosophical problem regarding the concept of being is delineated by Heidegger thusly: "If philosophy is the science of being, then the first and the last and basic problem of philosophy must be, What does being signify? Whence can something like being in general be understood? How is understanding of being at all possible?"⁴ The author, in this work, adopted the *Genitivus Objectivus* interpretation of the term 'science of being': being is something to be studied, and more than that, it is the one and only rightful object of philosophy. Although this will be the main interpretation throughout the book, Heidegger did not exclude the opposite interpretation, which will become dominant in the second text, *Metaphysics as History of Being*. For the author writes in the *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*: "Something like being reveals itself to us in the understanding of being, an understanding that lies at the root of all comportment toward beings."⁵ Regarded from the proposed point of view, this sentence is complex, for neither of the two interpretations is excluded: 'being reveals itself', means the subjective interpretation of 'reveal of being', but simultaneously it reveals itself to human mind, in the 'understanding of being', properly interpreted this time as *Genitivus Objectivus*. The possibility of coexistence of both interpretations is based on the concept that is the final aim of the *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, likewise one of the main concepts for Heidegger's thought – ontological difference: the ontical being would often be put into words by the grammar of *Genitivus Objectivus*, while ontological being will be spoken about by means of *Genitivus Objectivus*. The ontical being can be rendered

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 15.

⁵ *Idem*, p. 16.

in nominal and verbal senses, while ontological – only in the nominal sense. With this in mind, the next question raises the problem of the history of being.

In his *Basic problems*, Heidegger investigates “some characteristic theses about being as individual concrete phenomenological problems, theses that have been advocated in the course of the history of Western philosophy since Antiquity”⁶. The author immediately adds that his intention is not to investigate them “in the historical context (...) but in the specific inherent content”⁷. The notion of history can be grasped here, without making too big of a mistake, as chronological timeline, that is the sequence of episodes of intellectual life, from Antiquity onwards during which the said theses were proclaimed and advocated. Using the terms of this paper, the term ‘history of being’ is understood here through the *Genitivus Objectivus*, where ‘being’ is the ‘what’ which is studied during the various epochs of Western thought. The unfolding of various episodes, i.e. the history, appears to be of a high complexity, made of an entangled web of circumstances that shaped it, from which there is no escape, to the degree that, “[e]ven the ontological investigation which we are now conducting is determined by its historical situation and, therewith, by certain possibilities of approaching beings and by preceding philosophical tradition.”⁸. This sentence acknowledges the inclusion of the text itself in the history of being, which indicates a degree of consciousness about philosopher’s own historical positioning, putting the text neither outside, nor above the said history. These claims about the history are warranted, as Heidegger puts it “(...) [b]ecause the Dasein is historical in its own existence, possibilities of access and modes of interpretation of beings are themselves diverse, varying in different historical circumstances.”⁹ The principle, whose recognizable universality transcends the Heideggerian characteristic language, expressed in the cited sentence supports the validity of the relation between history and being. Most certainly this relation could be problematic, since in some philosophies being, namely the true being, together with its entire realm, and its modes of being are associated with atemporality. Not so, however, with the concept of being, which as a concept *in mente*, is historical as humans themselves are. Thus, as with any human enterprise that evolved along with humanity itself, there can also be a history of being. In order to see what precisely the content of the history of being, as M. Heidegger suggested it in his *Basic problems*, is we will take a closer look to the theses.

⁶ Idem, p. 15.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 22.

⁹ Ibidem.

We choose four such theses: 1. Kant's thesis: Being is not a real predicate. 2. The thesis of medieval ontology (Scholasticism) which goes back to Aristotle: to the constitution of being of a being there belong (a) whatness, essence (Was-sein, essentia), and (b) existence of extantness (existentia, Vorhandensein). 3. The thesis of modern ontology: the basic ways of being of nature (res extensa) and the being of mind (res cogitans). 4. The thesis of logic in the broadest sense: Every being, regardless of its particular way of being, can be addressed and talked about by means of the 'is.' The being of the copula. These theses seem at first to have been gathered arbitrarily.¹⁰

Indeed, they do, and because of that, Heidegger immediately proceeds to show their most intimate interconnection. For this work's purposes, however, we will be satisfied by presenting other ways of said interconnections. Out of four theses, there are two ontological distinctions: the one pertaining to Ancient-Medieval ontology, between essence and existence; another, modern and specifically Cartesian, between being of nature and that of reason. Furthermore, there are two theses pertaining to the theory of predication, fully intelligible within the domain of intersection of logic and ontology. Considered from the point of view of their origin, there is a Kantian thesis, a Medieval-Scholastic thesis with the roots in Aristotle's philosophy, a modern thesis, and a thesis of logic. This means, a thesis pertaining to a particular thinker, another – to a branch of philosophy, and the other two – to historical epochs. Using a rather loose sense of the terms we will say that there are three temporal and one a-temporal thesis, that of logic. The first three can perfectly be arranged chronologically, thus constructing the narrative of the history of being. It may very well appear that Modern ontology is represented here with two theses, and that there is no distinction between Ancient and Medieval ontology. This situation is, in fact, of a slightly different nature, since Kant's thesis according to Heidegger, does not belong to modern ontology but is placed in the continuation of the Ancient and Medieval, between which there indeed is too little of a difference, again according to the author.

"[A]ll ontological investigations proceed within an average concept of being in general,"¹¹ about whose origin and area of application the text reads: "[a]s early as Antiquity a common or average concept of being came to light, which was employed for the interpretation of all the beings of the various domains of being and their modes of being (...)."¹² This concept is the one that interests us the most.

¹⁰ Idem, p. 15

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 22.

¹² Ibidem.

To ancient understanding of being belongs the distinction between “the way in which something actual or existent is,”¹³ and, on the other hand, “that it is such and such. [t]he character of the what, the what-character.”¹⁴ That is, “the distinction between reality and existentia, or between essentia and existentia”¹⁵. Known since the times of Aristotle, and taken from then as self-evident, the only historical progress that this understanding of the ontological constitution of the being of a being has suffered is manifested in the difference that Antiquity never raised the question of “how this distinction is to be defined”¹⁶ whereas “The problem of the distinction and the connection – of the distinctio and the compositio – between the what-character of a being in its way of being, essentia and existentia, first becomes urgent in the Middle Ages.”¹⁷ In other words, the only progress is that the following epoch started questioning that which was self-evident for the previous. Thus, Heidegger will speak about the traditional concept of being, understanding by this name at least ancient and medieval concept of being, if not the concept that prevails in the understanding of the philosophers from Parmenides to Kant. Since Heidegger’s work is anything but a monograph on the history of philosophy, the chronology is loose. This fact does not affect the purposes of our essay, interested in the history of being.

Having thus established that there indeed is a medieval history of being, although nearly indistinguishable from the ancient, we will address the second question to Heidegger’s text, to which happily there is a straight answer, namely – what is special to traditional understanding of being, i.e. what is the pivotal concept by means of which the concept of being was grasped and explained. Indeed, for the second step of his research, Heidegger “shall attempt to trace the origin of the concepts essentia and existentia,”¹⁸ which means the need “to bring to light the horizon of the understanding and interpretation of what is denominated in these concepts.”¹⁹ Finally, this horizon is identified “in relation to our Dasein as an acting Dasein or, to speak more precisely, as a creative, productive Dasein.”²⁰ The conclusion needed as the answer for our question is that “the sense of actuality as it was conceived in ancient thought and Scholasticism (...) is understood by going

¹³ Idem, p. 78

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 78.

¹⁸ Idem, p. 100.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem.

back to the productive behavior of the Dasein²¹, and namely that “the concepts we have enumerated for essentia (quidditas, natura, definito, forma), must be made intelligible from this horizon of productive behavior.”²², or, in other words, the main idea is that “[p]roduction stands in the guiding horizon of this interpretation of whatness²³, and not only that, but also for the whole understanding of being in pre-Kantian philosophy.

The idea of “the comprehension of being by way of production”²⁴ is also present in the other Heidegger’s text, the one that records the “historical report about the history of the concept of Being”²⁵, known under the title *Metaphysics as History of Being*. By juxtaposing this two works pertaining to two distinct periods of Heidegger’s thinking, whose legitimacy we discussed some lines above, we wish to underline that Heidegger’s thinking itself marks an event of history of being, comprising two episodes, the second starting after the Kehre. As we will show, in spite of known discontinuities the thought is in no way devoid of continuity. Without trying to make an exhaustive comparison between the two Heideggers, the main difference among them, useful for the sake of this work, was already hinted at above and will be discussed in due course.

Although defining being is unanimously regarded as one of the most problematic questions of metaphysics, this text begins precisely with such a definition: “‘Being’ means that beings are, and are not nonexistent”, reads Heidegger’s text²⁶, adding the correlative characterisation of Being as “the decisiveness of the insurrection against nothingness.”²⁷ Once the insurrection is committed, the being is.

From a certain point onwards, it is possible to speak about the history of Being, a discussion in which the use of capitalized ‘B’ is far from accidental or irrelevant. The text reads that “[t]he history of Being as metaphysics begins with this distinction and its preparation”²⁸, namely with the already known distinction according to which “Being is divided into whatness and thatness”²⁹. Henceforth, there are some epochs that can roughly be equated with Antiquity, Middle Ages and so on. Assuming the limits of this paper however, anything farther than Medieval lies outside the strength to cover.

²¹ Idem, p. 102.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Idem, p. 105.

²⁴ Ibidem

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The End Of Philosophy*, The University Of Chicago Press, 1973, p. 1.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Idem, p. 2

²⁹ Ibidem.

In Greek Antiquity, that is, “In the beginning of its history, Being opens itself out as emerging (*physis*) and unconcealment (*aletheia*). From there it reaches the formulation of presence and permanence in the sense of enduring (*ousia*). Metaphysics proper begins with this.”³⁰ Let us outline here the difference of Heidegger’s thinking pre- and post-Kehre: the species of the Genitivus, which here assumes the species of Subjectivus: it is the Being which opens itself out. Being is no longer an object of history, the something to be studied, it the Subject which creates and lives said history.

The transitions from Antiquity to Middle Ages starts when “*Ergon* now characterizes the manner of presencing. Presence, *ousia*, thus means *energeia*.”³¹ The second epoch of Being begins when “*Energeia* becomes *actualitas*”³². There is also a context of this *translatio*, where one should take notice of the “transition from the Greek to the Roman conceptual language”, to the “Roman Character”, likewise to “politically imperial element of Rome” and also to the “Christian element of the Roman church”, to the all of these along with “imperial and papal elements”³³. It is under the action of these factors, that “*ergon* becomes the *opus* of the *operari*, the *factum* of the *facere*, the *actus* of the *agere*”³⁴. This epoch of manifestation of Being began once “Being has changed to *actualitas* (reality), beings are what is real. They are determined by working, in the sense of causal making”³⁵. The causality is further related to the activity of the prime causal factor - God, and “metaphysically thought, God is called the *summum ens*. The apex of his Being, however, consists in his being the *summum bonum*. For the *bonum* is *causa*, and as *finis* the *causa causarum*.”³⁶

Having reached this point, we are ready now to draw the first conclusions of the first part of this paper. To the question whether history of being in the Middle Ages can be taken as a subject of a rigorous and pertinent work of philosophy, we answered positively, arguing that there is in fact not only one but at least two works, albeit of the same author, that does that. The same positive answer is offered to the questions regarding the existence of a pivotal concept of medieval ontology. According to Martin Heidegger, production, the activity itself and the subsequent experience primarily, and likewise the concept thus gained, is the pivotal concept of pre-Kantian ontology. It is correctly called ‘horizon’ in both texts,

³⁰ Idem, p. 4

³¹ Martin Heidegger, *The End Of Philosophy*, The University Of Chicago Press, 1973, p. 5.

³² Idem, p 11

³³ Idem, p. 12

³⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵ Idem, p. 14

³⁶ Idem, p. 15

and parting from it the understanding of being and the entire vocabulary of being, together with its entire and complex web of interrelations evolved. Stating that 'production' is the pivotal concept, or the proper horizon, of the interpretation of the concept of being is not, however, devoid of its own problems, for it touches on the problem regarding the traditional hierarchy of concepts. One of the main properties of the concept of being is primacy, meaning that it should properly be conceived as the first concept, and consequently the simplest and most general, and most abstract and so on. It could appear however that we are contradicting this primacy by claiming that the concept of production is somehow prior to the concept of being. The apparent contradiction is prevented when the conceptual scheme of the inversion of the orders of understanding and of nature is employed. The concept of being thus keeps its primacy in order of simplicity and abstraction. Using Aristotelian vocabulary, the concept of production is prior, meaning that it is closer only "for us", and not in the order of nature: there is firstly the experience of production, then the concept of production, and ultimately the concept of being understood along these lines, in which said 'production' is stripped of the concrete content, becoming the pivotal concept of the understanding of being.

Summing up, from these works the following insights were gained: that the concept of history of being (and equally, the problem of being and understanding of being) can be understood twofold, either when being is taken as an active subject, or as a passive object of history and of understanding; that there is a history of being which starts, at least in Western philosophy, in Antiquity, with the distinction between whatness and thatness, and that this is the proper start of any possible ontological reflection. The following epoch, i.e. that of medieval ontology is not much different than the previous; and finally, that the understanding of being in these epochs can be itself understood and summed up through the concept of production. We reached our answers, but our research must, however, continue because one can hardly be satisfied with Heidegger's way of dealing with this problem. There are some problems that are too heavy to be overlooked.

Starting from the simplest one, M. Heidegger claims that the problem of the relationship between *essentia* and *existentia* "must be understood in the philosophical context of the distinction between the concepts of infinite and finite being"³⁷, without explaining why these and not any other of the numerous disjunctive properties of being. Further on, the text adds that this distinction touches on the problem of "God as the first and principal being (...) the *primum significatum*, that which is signified first, that which constitutes the significance of all significances; the *primum analogatum*, that to which every assertion about being and every

³⁷ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 81.

understanding of being is traced back.”³⁸ In this point, it may appear quite unfair to make a reference to the problem of analogy, when the explicit intention of the research is to reach the most general medieval concept of being, because the problem of analogy, univocation and equivocation of being is notoriously one of the main problems of medieval ontology, where the thesis ‘God as *primum analogatum*’ pertains to a single side of the problem, that is to the defenders of the analogy. Heidegger’s preference becomes crystal clear when text reads explicitly that “we shall not choose the purely historical path but instead take our orientation on this matter from Thomas, who himself takes up the tradition and passes it on after giving it further determination,”³⁹ confirming thus that the suspicion of the philosopher’s siding with one precise party of medieval philosophy of being was not that exaggerated or groundless at all. This, however, is in no way a pretentious and disrespectful objection to Heidegger’s contribution to the problem, but a fact that needs to be taken into consideration. We stressed above that M. Heidegger acknowledges his own historical situation, and itself the fact to take Thomas Aquinas’s ontological theses as representative for the whole Middle Ages, is itself, in fact, a historical position, inscribed in the precise episode of the evolution of medieval studies, inaugurated by and having as its main representative figure – Étienne Gilson. Thus, it is of no wonder that the works of these two philosophers, Gilson and Heidegger, that is *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* and *Being and Some Philosophers*, without claiming any influence one upon another, coincide in the idea that philosophy of being begins with the distinction between essence and existence.

We would believe, consequently, that these and many more similar sentences, are the reason that determined Oliva Blanchette to rise a doubt⁴⁰ whether Heidegger himself went far enough in deconstructing the Medieval epoch of being, or, we will add, did he remain too caught up in the modern prejudices towards the Middle Ages’s thinking. One simply cannot escape the rightful feeling that there is much more to this epoch than it is suggested by Heidegger. Yet, the same Oliva Blanchette suggested that the optimal point would be to start “referring first to Heidegger, who has done more than anyone else in our time to bring the question of being back to the forefront of philosophy.”⁴¹

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 83

⁴⁰ Oliva Blanchette, *Philosophy of Being. A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*, The Catholic University of America Press, 2003, p. xiii

⁴¹ Idem, p. xiv

4. Medieval history of being from the perspective of transcendentality

The title of Heidegger's second text to which we referred above contains a thesis with which we strongly agree. For that reason, it will be taken as our starting point, namely the idea that there is an essential relation between the history of being and metaphysics. Not, however, in the way that metaphysics is nothing more than a chronology of theses about being, but meaning, firstly, that the history of metaphysics is tied to the history of being, and, secondly, that metaphysics is the science of being that evolved alongside the evolution of the concept of being. In the next few lines, we would attempt to offer the shortest and the most synthetic history of medieval metaphysics in order to see how it can help us to reconstruct the history of being in the Middle Ages⁴².

Firstly, there were two projects from Antiquity which the Middle Ages inherited: the metaphysics of the Aristotelian authorship and the henology of the Platonic and the Neoplatonic origin. These two are in no way opposed to each other, for the henology is not foreign to Aristotle's metaphysics, which was stressed by the Neoplatonism of the Late Antiquity through the aspiration to synthesize the two greatest sources of ancient philosophy, Plato and Aristotle, incorporating the insights from the *Metaphysics* into the project of henology. Likewise, the project of philosophy of being is not foreign to henology. However, of these two only one – Aristotle's metaphysics – will be directed towards claiming the title of science represented in the curricula of what will be known as University. Further on, in addition to those listed there is one more source of medieval ontological reflection, namely the ontological thesis of Abrahamic Divinity (common to the three religions of Mediterranean Sea) which stated, as an axiom for philosophy and as a dogma for religion, the identity between God and being. Having these sources, the history of metaphysics can be roughly divided into three episodes. The first is so-called Aetas Boethiana. It covers, in Europe, with rough approximation the period from Boethius until the Thirteenth century, when *Metaphysics*' translation becomes fully available. It is marked by the fact that Aristotle's *Categories*, and Boethius' *De Hebdomadibus* are the main starting points of reflection about being. This is likewise the episode in which the problem of universals, the problem of essence and existence and the problem of transcendentals are properly and explicitly formulated, receiving, in

⁴² The following exposition sums up two works, which are recommended to be consulted for in depth analysis: Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought. From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suarez*, Brill, 2012; and Jan A. Aertsen, "The Transformation of Metaphysics In The Middle Ages", in K. Emery, A. Friedman, A. Speer, *Philosophy and Theology in the Long Middle Ages*, Brill, 2011.

addition, the first theses which from this point on will start the dialogue for the centuries to come. After this, there is the epoch of first philosophy in Arab *falsafa*, chronologically situated between Al-Kindi's *De Prima Philosophia*, and Averroes's *Commentaries on Metaphysics*, which were second in importance only to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* itself. According to such source as Duns Scotus⁴³, in this episode of the history of metaphysics the main vectors of understanding of the nature of the metaphysics are prefigured: it is either a science of being or a science about God. The final episode lasted from High to Late Scholastics. As is quite unanimously accepted it ends with Suarez's *Disputations*, which is considered to be the last synthesis of medieval metaphysics, with which ends the tradition of commentaries and starts the era of treatises⁴⁴.

Concluding the above, the sources of the reflection about being appear, on the first sight, to be twofold: philosophical and religious. Under closer investigation, the philosophical sources are themselves, again, twofold: Aristotelian and Neoplatonic or Platonic. About the last, however, there would not be unnecessary to mention that a source such as E. Gilson speaks about the inherent religiosity of neoplatonic writings,⁴⁵ which underlines again the intrinsic entanglement of the mixture of all the sources. Lastly, likewise twofold are the theoretical domains of the reflection about being, which are both logical and ontological. Because of the mixture of said sources the label of transcendentalism is, since the Middle Ages, irreversibly attached to the concept of being. By this we do not intend to advocate that the transcendentalism has been unknown to Ancient philosophy, but rather that it was more problematic, and that the said character was not in the forefront of investigations, unlike in the Middle Ages.

In the next lines we will try to take a closer look at the meaning of '*transcendentia*' and interpret the concept of being from this point of view. We find this approach suitable point of departure for at least three reasons. Firstly, transcendence seems to be an inseparable feature of being itself. Secondly, the

⁴³ "Therefore our first question: Is the proper subject of metaphysics being qua being as Avicenna claims or God and the Intelligences as the Commentator, Averroes assumes?", see John Duns Scotus, *The Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, Franciscan Institute Publications, 1997, p. 13

⁴⁴ According to a study authored by William O. Duba, this claim should be revised. The author shows that the title of the first treaty on metaphysics that is not a commentary would belong to XIVth century scotist Nicholas Bonet's work titled '*Metaphysia*'. For more details see: William O. Duba, "Three Franciscan Metaphysicians after Scotus: Antonius Andreae, Francis of Marchia, and Nicholas Bonet" in F. Amerini and G. Galluzzo, *A Companion to the Latin Medieval Commentaries on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Brill, 2014, p. 464 sqq.

⁴⁵ "Plato had been a philosopher with a deep religious feeling; Plotinus looks rather as a theologian with deep philosophical insight", for more details on this, see Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952, pp. 17 sqq.

transcendence of being was undisputed throughout the whole of Middle Ages. And lastly, this concept plays the role of a bridge between medieval and modern understandings of being, since the meaning of being itself will change together with the meaning of transcendence, in Kant's philosophy. In what follows, two things are wished to be accomplished. First, to recall the meanings of transcendence according to Jan Aertsen's account. The second, to use these insights to advance a perspective through which the medieval history of being could be written.

Aertsen starts by mentioning that there is an opinion, shared among others by L. M de Rijk that "the expression 'transcendental' is an exclusively Kantian terminology, but this assumption is not correct."⁴⁶ And the most obvious and irrefutable argument for this is Kant himself, who is referring to the transcendental philosophy of the ancients in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.

With the purpose of explaining and fixing the terminology for the inquiry to be exposed further, Aertsen devotes numerous pages to scrutinize the *Declaratio difficultum terminorum* of Armand of Bellevue, a "fourteenth-century lexicon that is also highly interesting for the history of philosophy"⁴⁷. The conclusion that the author formulates at the end of his exposition, which also bears a determinative role for his entire work, is that: "[a]lthough Armand states that the "transcending", expressed in the term '*transcendens*', occurs "in three manners", it is evident that the essential division in his explanation is twofold, namely the distinction between transcending through 'the nobility of being' and through 'the commonness of predication'."⁴⁸

Therefore, we find again two aspects. There are "two types of *transcensus*, which differ from one another with respect to that which transcends, i.e. the terminus of the process of surpassing, and to that which is transcended."⁴⁹ Namely these two: "*Transcendens* (1) relates to God, who is beyond every being; what is transcended is the material or created world. *Transcendens* (2) relates to the common features of reality; what is transcended is the categorial multiplicity or particularity of things."⁵⁰ In the language of Johannes Scharff, the first kind of transcendence operates by means of *entis nobilitate*, while the second, through *praedicationis communitate*⁵¹. Nobility and commonness, although looking much like antonyms are here taken as closely related, both advocating for the transcendence of being.

⁴⁶ Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez*, Brill, 2021, p. 14.

⁴⁷ Idem, p. 15.

⁴⁸ Idem, p. 18.

⁴⁹ Idem, p. 19.

⁵⁰ Idem, pp. 19-20.

⁵¹ Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez*, Brill, 2021, p. 20.

As a development of this double understanding, and likewise as the proof that it in fact persisted through the ages, the book recalls “the treatise *De natura generis*. This anonymous treatise has (wrongly) been attributed to Thomas Aquinas.”⁵² Leaving aside the problem of authorship, Jan A. Aertsen is pointing out that this text speaks of “a *duplex analogia* found in being. It is applied to the division of being into substance and the accidents (the “transcendental” analogy), and it is applied to God and the creatures (the “theological” analogy).”⁵³ Latter on, the author would define “[a] typical feature of the medieval doctrine is that it teaches a *duplex analogia*, a twofold application of the analogy of being and the transcendental terms”⁵⁴. The two senses correspond to the two of the main sources of Medieval Thought that it inherited from the ancient past, no others than Aristotelian and Neoplatonic texts, which has been already mentioned above: “In the reception of Aristotle the application of analogy to the categorial diversity found acceptance: ‘Being’ or ‘good’ is said of substance and accident according to a relation of ‘prior’ and ‘posterior’. The reception of Dionysius determinates another, Platonic application of the doctrine, the ‘theological’ analogy, which is concerned with the relation of divine and creaturely being. (...) ‘Analogy’ is the ‘proportion’ or different ‘capacity’ of creatures to participate in the divine perfections, a capacity that determines the place of every being in the hierarchy of things.”⁵⁵ Indeed, we see here the degree of the closeness, that we spoke of, between the history of metaphysics and the understanding of being. The understanding of the transcendentality of being copies the twofold scheme of the history of metaphysics in what regards the sources and the domains.

Furthermore, in a not much different sense one could understand also “Thomas’s distinction between two kinds of commonness. Considering what is common (*communia*) to all beings, he distinguishes commonness by predication and commonness by causality.” Quite evidently, the last refers to abovesaid commonness *via entis nobilitate* while the first, to the *praedicationis communitate*.

Accordingly, when it comes to writers and writings that have articulated this understanding of transcendence of being, or, speaking in Heideggerian language, to which Being presented itself in this kind of double surpassing, Aertsen mentions two kinds of philosophies, or more properly “divergent philosophical orientations: one understands itself as a “philosophy of the transcendent”, the other as “transcendental philosophy”. The history of First Philosophy or metaphysics is determined by a tension

⁵² Idem, p. 49.

⁵³ Idem, p. 50.

⁵⁴ Idem, p.106.

⁵⁵ Idem, pp. 106 – 107.

between these two tendencies.”⁵⁶ Under the aegis of the philosophy of transcendent are included Plato, seen through the eyes of Augustine, who also is a part of this orientation. Moreover, based on Aertsen’s sentence that reads that “[i]n his characterization of the Platonist’s intention by the verb *transcendere*, Augustine gave their purport a personal twist by interpreting it as an *itinerarium mentis in Deum*.”⁵⁷, one would legitimately include Bonaventure in this order. Under the same umbrella are included also the Neoplatonism of *Corpus Dionysiacum*, and the particular understanding of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* that results from this view.

In what regards the second understanding of philosophy, “[i]llustrative of the transformation is the etymological explanation of the name ‘metaphysics’, which Duns Scotus presents in his *Questions on the Metaphysics*.”⁵⁸. This is because, “[t]ranscendens in Scotus’s text does not mean “transcendent”, but rather “transcendental”, and qualifies the scope of this science. In the passage just preceding his account of the name, Scotus had introduced the term *transcendentia* as another name for the *communissima*, such as being qua being and its properties”⁵⁹, that is, as *praedicationis communitate* rather than *entis nobilitate*. Under this orientation of philosophy, the transcendental, one also finds Porphyry *Isagoge*, Aristotle’s *Categories*, and all the amount of related works it generated, including here “(among others) Boethius, Peter Abelard, Albert the Great, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham.”⁶⁰

There is yet another instance that proves the historical persistency of this twofoldness, which as it is clearly now, is one of the main notions of our paper. This instance is the more interesting it is as it is problematic. Writing the famous and undoubtedly influential work *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*, in the second part of the XXth century, Joseph Owens starts with the question asking how to distinguish Aristotelian from Platonic understandings of being. For this, the author is referring to the 1930’s work about Alexander de Hales’ concept of being, written by Johann Fuchs, where the answer is not much different from the determinations already provide above: Platonic Being is conceived as *ens perfectissimum*, as the proper concept of God, while the Aristotelian concept of Being is the *ens commune*, the most abstract, the most empty of content, and thus having the widest extension.⁶¹ Without a shadow of a doubt this thesis is problematic to say

⁵⁶ Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez*, Brill, 2021, p.20

⁵⁷ Idem, p. 21

⁵⁸ Idem, p. 26

⁵⁹ Idem, p. 26

⁶⁰ Idem, p. 27

⁶¹ Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine Of Being In The Aristotelian Metaphysics*, Pontifical Institute Of Medieval Studies, 1978, p. 1

the least, as Owens does, writing that “some serious misgivings arise after a little reflection on this situation.”⁶² The recent papers on history of philosophy showed enough how misleading the use of these criteria to qualify certain thinkers as Aristotelians or Platonists can be. Nevertheless, what is persistent is the idea that up until the XXth century the discussion on being does not abandon the twofold terrain of the more theological, or more logical facies that being shows, in which we can easily enough recognize the twofoldness of sources of medieval metaphysics.

Resuming what was said so that the investigation could go further, we will reiterate that there are two senses of the transcendental character of being, or, alternatively, the being presents itself in double sense of transcendence, namely in the order of things, through its nobility and causation; and in the order of understanding, playing the role of the most common name that any thing whatsoever can adopt. The double transcendence meant a double understanding of analogy, especially for those for whom being was unconceivable outside of it. But it also meant that there can be two vectors of human endeavor to understand and explain the existing world, grounded on these two ways of seeing the transcendental character of being. Thus, there are two senses of transcendence, two understandings of commonness, and two philosophical orientations. In the next few lines we will present, shortly and synthetically, the medieval concept of being grasped along these lines, together with the desired pivotal concepts drawn from the twofold concept of transcendence.

5. The problem of being in Middle Ages: procession and convertibility

To think and to interpret the concept of being parting from the understandings of the concept of transcendentality does not mean anything other than to understand the investigated object through its proper activity, that is to ask ‘what the being does when the being is?’ or ‘what does it mean for the being to be’, and consequently narrowing down the question to the chronological limits of this paper – ‘how did Medieval era of thought conceived the fact that being is?’ As we showed above, the most proper property of being is transcendence, thus ‘the being is’, means ‘the being transcends’: it transcends concepts likewise realities, according to the senses of surpassing explained above, culminating in the identity of being with good, unity, truth and God. The action by which being transcends concepts is understood as the action by which being converts from one concept into another, in a quasi-total synonymy. By the transcendence of realities is meant the action by which being ‘makes’ them be (when the genesis is understood as

⁶² Idem, p. 3

creation; or it 'lets' them be, as it is more properly to say in the neoplatonic context of the genesis of the reality), it creates something posterior to it, itself remaining always behind. Being is thus always precedent, it proceeds, using the Neoplatonic term of Pseudo-Dionysian coinage.

In this fashion we have arrived at the formulation of the searched pivotal concepts. The transcendental of being within the logical hierarchy of concepts will be called by its Scholastic name – 'convertibility', while the transcendental of being along the hierarchy of realities will be called, using the neoplatonic name, 'procession'. With no doubt the term 'procession' is a close synonym of the 'emanation', the proper Plotinian term, thus we would need to explain why the choice did not fall in the second instead. Sure enough it could perfectly function, so our preference is circumstantial and in no way necessary, some minor factors determined us to opt for this term: that the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus is chronologically closer to medieval world of thought than the writings of Plotinus; likewise it is explicitly the result of intersection of philosophical and religious sources; and also, because 'procession' unlike 'emanation' has also an immanent sense to it, referring not only to celestial, that is metaphysical, hierarchy, but likewise to the social.

Therefore, being in the Middle Ages showed itself, or has been conceived through procession and convertibility.

Conceived by means of the pivotal concept of 'procession', the concept of being stands for the the absolute source, the first cause and the ultimate end. It is untold for it is radically beyond, hence it can only be praised through various realities it causes. It is characterized by infinite nobility and asks for veneration. As untold it is consequently unknown. The concept of procession ultimately explains the hierarchy of realities and values. Sure enough, this facet of the concept of being is more properly spoken of, certainly to the extent to which it is possible at all, through by the grammar of Genitivus Subiectivus, through the nominal sense of being (i.e. as a noun), and, somewhat ironically, less by the verbal (or processual) meaning.

Through 'convertibility', being is said in many ways, it is the most common name that can be applied to all the existing realities. Being is not a genus. It has maximal extension, and thus it embraces all the things. It can only be known, conceived, studied however there is little to be understood, for having maximal extension, it has the least content. It has no obstacles to being spoken about in the verbal or normal senses, assuming the role of the subject likewise the predicate. As a name it needs clarification whether it is univocal, equivocal or denominative. Through convertibility one can make judgements about the logical hierarchy of terms.

Should one raise the question whether there are, in fact, two different concepts of being instead of one concept understood through two pivotal concepts,

that are distinct yet not different, the answer will have to be negative. Because under the principles of convertibility, are converting the names of those things which proceed in the procession of being. In other words, the names of the object of procession are the ones which are convertible. Why then is it necessary at all to distinguish them? Firstly because of the spheres of being under research: logical on the one hand, ontological – on the other. Similarly, in our interpretation, the existence of convertible concepts, i.e. interchangeable terms, is motivated, metaphysically, by the fact that the things bearing the respective names are the result of the procession, that is, that they have a common first cause which, according to the known principle from the *Liber de Causis* is more influential upon the caused thing than any other from the hierarchy. This is so, because the caused reality bears the imprint, the trace, *vestigium*, upon them of the prime cause. We specified above that the motivation is specifically ‘metaphysical’ because, as the convertibility functions in the sphere of logical conceptualization, there is also a logical motive of quasi-identity established among convertible terms, namely because of the extension of terms, and similar semantics that they bear, likewise the sameness of the referent: the paper on which I am writing these notes is a being, a *res*, an *aliquid*; in its character of something existing and, in fact, present it is empirically real, thus *verum*, and since it bears all of the above – my paper is something *bonum*. Concluding this remarks, it is to be reiterated that the procession and the convertibility are two complementary concepts, or aspects of Being that thusly manifests itself, still, the two are distinct in the order of understanding and exposition. The fact of the complementarity lacking the obvious hierarchy to them can be seen as the cause that determined the urgency of the problem of analogy. It can be reformulated in the term of this essay thusly: is being primarily and principally conceived by convertibility, and thus being is univocal, since to be convertible it has to be synonymous, or it should be conceived through analogy with its apex of procession – the said *primum analogatum*, *primum ens*. In this way, the misconception according to which the medieval philosophy is seen as a conflict between Aquinas and Scotus, that is between Dominicans and Franciscans, that is between analogy and univocity becomes understandable. It is so because interpreted in the way we proposed we wished to underline that the gravity of this problem is due to it touching the pivotal concepts of the whole of medieval philosophy.

We wouldn’t dare to close this section without clarifying another possible misunderstanding that we anticipate. The misunderstanding would consist in the use of the terms conceptual and realistic, when referring to, respectively, convertibility and procession. Because procession is no more ‘real’ than convertibility is. Regardless

of the degree of belief or conviction with which one could treat it, the procession will remain a theoretical model, i.e. conceptual scheme by means of which the thinkers, Greek likewise Arab and Latin speaking ones, Pagan likewise Christian, and Arab, argued for a determined origin and hierarchy of the observable universe.

One last thing to mention is that the proposed apparatus of pivotal concepts of convertibility and procession proves to be useful likewise as a tool of interpreting the intellectual history of the Middle Ages and the transition towards Modernity, namely the event, whose importance is hard, if not impossible, to overestimate, the Condemnations of 1277.

This event has been the object of study of many investigations. By the fact that each of them has been focusing and emphasizing one particularity of the event's complexity, we find ourselves in the position of a big comprehensive picture, composed of complementary descriptions. Firstly, from what transpires from the text of condemnation and from the fact that the title targets directly Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia, it is unanimously accepted that the target of the condemnations is the so called averroistic aristotelism, that is a kind of aristotelism with a prominent arab neoplatonic influence. Further, as it is shown by A. Baumgarten, the cultural shift marked by said Condemnations can be understood as a fracture from which started the abandonment of the hierarchical understanding of the world's architecture, based on the qualitative understanding of beings⁶³. In a similar context, according to E. Gilson "[t]he very spirit of that famous ecclesiastical pronouncement is the solemn refusal it opposes to Greco-Arabic determinism and the claim it lays to liberty (...) Bishop Etienne Tempier was simply asking, in the name of the Christian Faith, for a free world under a free God."⁶⁴ In other words, the attack has been directed towards the necessitarian understanding of the world, so alien to Christian worldview. In the terms of this paper, we can say that what was under attack was the pivotal concept of procession, by means of which being appeared with its characteristics of necessity and hierarchy. Thus, the transition from Middle Ages to the Modernity meant the abandonment of procession alone from the concept of transcendentality of being, responsible for the necessary hierarchical understanding of the genesis of realities with all the intermediary beings, and the vertical hierarchy of values conceived through the category of quality, while keeping the modified version of the convertibility, in which *ens* loses its priority firstly to *ens reale* and latter to *res*, which consequently opens the possibility for the rise of the philosophies

⁶³ See Aristotel et al. *De mundi aeternitate*, IRI, 1999, especially the afterword; Alexander Baumgarten, *Principiile Cerului*, Humanitas, 2008. and Alexander Baumgarten, "Saint Thomas, La censure universitaire du 7 mars 1277 et la genèse de la modernité philosophique", in Laura Bădescu (ed.) *Perspectives contemporaines sur le monde médiéval*, Tiparg, 2010, pp. 40-55.

⁶⁴ Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952, p. 83.

centered on the concepts of extension (Descartes) or of object and position (Kant). The abandonment of the procession meant primarily the abandonment of Neoplatonic sources, among which the main should be *Liber the Causis*, as one of the main exponents of the said procession-type understanding of being, together with the concepts of necessity and hierarchy it contains. This is why, without any real corelation between them, Kant's *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, which heavily rests on Hume's critiques of the concept of causality, can be productively seen and read as a direct attack on said *Liber de Causis*.

Having stated all these we can draw now the final conclusions of the paper.

6. Conclusive remarks

Three questions have been raised: 1) whether it is possible at all to have as a subject of pertinent research the problem of being in the Middle Ages? 2) whether it is possible to identify some pivotal concepts in the medieval philosophy of being? 3) what is special to the medieval concept of being? In light of the fact that this paper is about medieval philosophy, as an act of reverence to it, we can equate the first part of this paper with an *argumentum ad auctoritatem* where we tried to show that the positive answers to our questions are based on empirical existence of Heidegger's research on the subject. However, this *auctoritas* has been deemed not too convincing, which is why we assumed our own navigation and our own method. Thus, with the help of current exegetical literature on the Middle Ages' philosophy we have come to the following conclusions. The problem of being in the Middle Ages is indeed a fruitful subject of research, especially if it is considered in its Genitivus Objectivus interpretation which avoids, sometimes exaggerated, personification of being. Seeing the history of being close to the history of metaphysics, and implicitly adhering as close as possible to available sources, it is indeed possible to come to a formulation of the problem of being in the Middle Ages. Thus, our final proposition is this: In the Middle Ages, the being has been conceived mainly through its transcendental character, which in this epoch of thought becomes one of its essential characteristics, which in particular meant the twofold conceiving of the surpassing as procession and convertibility, two concepts that play the role of pivotal concepts of the medieval ontology. This being the main conclusion, we must add that the paper acknowledges its limits, among the which we want to stress the following: agreeing with Heidegger's title, *Metaphysics as History of being*, we said that history of being is inseparable from the history of metaphysics, and as long as the latter is yet to be written, so is the former, it itself remains yet to be written too.

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