Summary of Course C.4-4: Issues in Contemporary Ontology

General Overview

This course offers a comprehensive historical and systematic study of ontology, defined as the inquiry into 'being as being' since Parmenides of Elea.

The historical section analyses the three classical ancient ontological positions: the nominalism of Protagoras, with its denotative and phenomenalist approach; Aristotelian conceptual realism, which formulates the essential form and four explanatory causes through abstraction; and Platonic-Augustinian ideational conceptual realism, with its five-stage dialectical method, metaphysics of light and introspective *cogito*.

This framework of thought develops, through Albinus of Smyrna and medieval Scholasticism — including the debate over universals and the distinction between *essentia* and *existentia* in Thomas Aquinas and Francisco Suárez — into a fully developed Christian ontology.

The course then analyses the genesis of modern rationalism, from William of Ockham's mediative terminism, through Galileo's mathematical natural science and the Cartesian dualism of 'étendue' and 'pensée', to the materialism of de Sade, nihilism and Sloterdijk's cynical reason.

In systematic ontology, the transcendental, analogical and objective character of reality is grounded in harmology (the theory of unity and order) and the transcendentals (*ens, res, unum, verum, bonum*). This culminates in three particular branches of ontology: cosmology, rational psychology (noölogy) and natural theology.

1. Introduction and the Three Classical Ancient Ontologies

The course begins with the fundamental lemma of ontology: the theory of reality, or 'being as being', formulated by Parmenides of Elea. Within ancient Greek philosophy, three fundamental ontological positions are distinguished:

Nominalist ontology (Protagoras and early Sophism):

This approach considers reality through names (*onomata*) or denotation. It reduces reality to sensory perception (sensism), appearance (phenomenalism) and matter. The human being is regarded as the measure of all things, while supersensible entities such as the soul or divinity are agnostically reduced to terms used in the human sciences.

Conceptual-realist abstractivist ontology (Aristotle):

In opposition to nominalism, this position maintains that the human intellect can abstract the common essential form (*morphè, eidos* or *ousia*) from individual data. Aristotle formulates the analogy of being (*homoiotropia, partim*

idem partim diversum), whereby being is used in different senses in a convergent manner. He analyses processes of change through the interaction between potentiality (*dunamis*) and actuality (*energeia* or *entelechia*), the organicist seed-and-germ model, and four explanatory factors: matter, form, the agent or origin, and the final cause. This leads to trans-hylomorphic realism, with the Unmoved Mover (*actus purus*) as the first cause.

Conceptual-realist ideational ontology (Plato):

This position defines reality in terms of Ideas as immaterial archetypes and regulative models. Plato develops a dialectical method comprising five stages: the name, the conceptual definition, the intuitive and applicative model, scientific insight (*theoria*) within the soul, and the Idea itself. The analogy of being is differentiated here into summative, distributive, collective, exemplary-cybernetic (the seal model) and generative analogy.

2. The Transformation in Patristics: Albinus and Augustine

Ancient ideational ontology undergoes a fundamental Christian transformation in late antiquity and the Patristic period:

Albinus of Smyrna: He represents a turning point by being the first to identify Platonic Ideas with the thoughts of God (theocentric essentialism). He introduces apophatic (negative) theology and places deification (*theiosis*) through the moderation of the passions at the centre of ethics.

St Augustine of Tagaste: He develops a Christian philosophy centred on the doctrine of illumination (the metaphysics of light). His theory of knowledge rests on a reflective foundation (*si fallor, sum* / the *cogito*). He extends this to the complete human *cogito* as a *ternarium* of *esse, nosse, velle* (being, knowing, willing), or *memoria, intellectus, amor*. In historiology, Augustine replaces the ancient cyclical conception of history with a linear plan of salvation in which the *civitas Dei* (City of God) and the *civitas terrena* (earthly city) struggle. His sociology defines peace (*pax*) and concord (*concordia*) as ontological categories of orderedness, while his theory of conflict exposes the deep structure of social breakdowns as a form of satanic egoism.

3. Medieval Scholasticism and Suarezianism

Medieval Scholasticism develops the first fully fledged systematic Christian ontology:

The Debate over Universals: This examines whether general concepts express essential realities (*universalia ante rem, in re, post rem*). Thomas

Aquinas reconciles Aristotelian realism with Augustinian idealism and sharpens the distinction between essential nature (*essentia*) and actual existence (*existentia*).

Epistemology and the Sense of Authority: Scholasticism is characterised by an axiomatic awareness in which dogmas function as supra-rational premises, analogous to mathematical principles in astronomy.

Suarezianism: Francisco Suárez systematizes ontology by reducing the transcendentals to unity (harmology), truth (theory of knowledge) and goodness (axiology), and directly connects natural theology with ontology. In juridical Suarezianism, he develops the Neoscholastic relationship between the thesis (the pure normative idea) and the hypothesis (concrete, situation-dependent factual reality).

4. The Genesis of Modern Rationalism and the Enlightenment

Modernity emerges from a sharp break with medieval conceptual realism:

William of Ockham's Terminism:

Ockham replaces the 'noble yoke' of direct correspondence between knowledge and reality with conceptualism and terminism: concepts are merely substitute signs (*supponant pro realibus*). Knowledge thereby becomes subjective and mediative (operating through inner signs of thought), leading to a discontinuous, atomic picture of reality and to Ockham's razor.

Transitional Philosophy and the Scientific Revolution:

Non-intellectual factors, such as the nation-state (Machiavelli) and voyages of discovery (perspectivism), as well as intellectual factors such as the Reformation (Calvin's predestination and economic rigorism), reshape the social climate. Galileo brings about the scientific revolution by detaching nature from Aristotelian qualitative causes and reducing it to instrumental measurement and mathematical invariants.

Cartesian Dualism as Prematerialism:

René Descartes seeks an apodictic foundation in the individual *cogito*. He divides reality into *pensée* (immaterial thought) and *étendue* (spatial extension). By eliminating qualities in favor of mechanical-mathematical atomism, his philosophy — despite his personal faith — functions as a form of prematerialism.

Materialism, Nihilism and Cynical Reason:

When the autonomy of the subject further detaches itself from all transcendence, it degenerates into de Sade's materialism (reducing the human being to material transformation of form), the nihilism of Ernst Jünger and Sartre, and the critique of the Enlightenment. Peter Sloterdijk describes the ultimate triumph of 'cynical reason', in which critical consciousness is unmasked as a calculated instrument of power.

5. The Basic Framework of Systematic Ontology

In the second part, the course develops an inductive basic framework for systematic ontology:

General Ontology:

This studies 'being as being' according to three fundamental characteristics: (1) it is transcendental (it encompasses everything that is not nothing); (2) it is analogous or partially identical; and (3) it exists in itself (*to kath' heauto*), independently of our subjective representations.

Phenomenology and the Transcendentals:

Ontological analysis moves beyond mere phenomenalism by proceeding through phenomena towards transphenomenal essence and Ideas. The properties of reality are summarized in the transcendentals: *ens/res* (actual existence and mode of being), *unum* (harmology and laws of analogical order), *verum* (epistemology, the noble yoke of correspondence between intellect and reality), and *bonum* (axiology and value).

Particular Ontologies:

General ontology finds its concrete application in three particular ontologies:

1. Cosmology (Philosophy of Nature): Examines the interaction between matter, energy and information, as well as Vladimir Solovyov's stratified universe, in which irreducible essential forms ascend from inorganic matter through plants and animals to human beings.
2. Noölogy (Rational Psychology): Defines the human being as a unique personalist and solidaristic spirit-soul attuned to the cosmic order.
3. Natural Theology: Forms the rational culmination of ontology by understanding finite being in terms of the transcendence of the Supreme being.