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Ontology and Critical Philosophy

A recent essay by Peter van Inwagen opens with the observation that ‘Ontology is a very old subject, but “ontology” is a relatively new word’ (van Inwagen 2009: 472). Indeed, as a topic warranting systematic study, the subject is usually traced back to Aristotle or Parmenides, while the word, in its Latin form ‘ontologia’, is not known to have appeared in print until German philosopher Jacob Lorhard’s *Ogdoas Scholastica* in 1606. It is uncontroversial, because it is evident in the word itself, that ‘ontology’ signifies the study (or theory, discourse, science) of *being* or *that which is*. This general definition is reiterated at points in Bhaskar’s work, and it is present in Kant’s as well, though in a more nuanced form. In Kant’s lecture courses on metaphysics there are clear and succinct expressions of his conception of ontology, which he inherited from the rationalist metaphysicians Christian Wolff and Alexander Baumgarten. There, ontology is defined as ‘the science (…) which is concerned with the more general properties of all things’ (TP1 295) and ‘the science of the properties of all things in general’ (LM 140), and it is said that ‘Ontology thus deals with things in general, it abstracts from everything particular’ (ibid. 307) and ‘Ontology (…) contains the summation of all our pure concepts that we can have a priori of things’ (ibid. 308). Similarly, Baumgarten’s *Metaphysics*, which Kant often used as the textbook for his metaphysics courses, defines ontology as ‘the science of the general predicates of a thing’ (Baumgarten 1739: §4), while the second chapter of Wolff 1720, in which Wolff sets out the basic principles of his ontology, is titled ‘On the First Principles of Our Cognition and of All Things in General’.

In each of these characterizations of ontology we are given that discipline’s distinctive object of concern, for Kant: *things*. More specifically: that which pertains to things in the most general fashion, and
thus things in general. Insofar as we understand a thing as that which has being, or that which is, then Kant’s conception of ontology is consonant with the conventional definition. Bhaskar accepts this ontological understanding of ‘thing’ as well and elaborates on the internal unity that is a requirement of ‘thinghood’: ‘An entity counts as a “thing” if it possesses sufficient internal complexity, organisation, structure or coherence to count as a unit (or system) or a class (or part) of such units or a complex of relations between or within such units or classes or parts, or if it consists in any earthed function of any of the foregoing’ (SRHE 218). Moreover, he argues that, especially in light of recent natural science, the concept of a thing exceeds and so must be distinguished from that of an ordinary material object, for there are things such as powers, fields, gases, genetic codes, and electronic structures.  

The ‘in general’ in Kant’s ‘things in general’ is important as well, for it underscores the generality of ontology’s subject matter relative to that of other disciplines. It also reflects the characterization of ontology as a branch of metaphysics, namely, general metaphysics – to be contrasted with the special metaphysics of theology, cosmology, and psychology – in the architectonic of Wolff’s and Baumgarten’s systems (the same architectonic that is mirrored in the structure of the Critique of Pure Reason, where the Transcendental Analytic replaces traditional ontology). Somewhat similarly, Bhaskar often clarifies the generality of ontology’s subject matter by distinguishing philosophical ontologies, which delineate the general character of being and with which Bhaskar himself is concerned, from scientific ontologies, which describe the particular things, postulated by particular scientific theories, that instantiate the general characteristics of being. (Thus Bhaskar’s conception of a scientific ontology could perhaps be construed as a contemporary version of pre-critical rationalism’s special metaphysics.)

It is not immediately clear, however, what conceptual form a study of being or things in general would take – that is, how it would be configured or elaborated. Bhaskar says more about ontology in this regard, but I want to distinguish a frequent characterization of ontology prominent in his earlier work from one in his later work that I think is superior and more in line with Kant’s conception of ontology. Bhaskar often says, especially in his earlier work, that ontology is distinctively concerned with what the world is like. This phrase is frequently used in connection with ontology by some contemporary analytic metaphysicians and ontologically-oriented philosophers of science. Furthermore, this kind