

On Transcendentals

A concept is said to be “transcendent” in later scholastic philosophy insofar as it goes beyond the limits of any and all class concepts, including categories, and therefore applies to literally everything without restriction. Such concepts are called “transcendentals” (= *transcendentia*, or *transcendentalia*) and are usually understood to include “being,” or “a being” (= *ens* = *das Seiende*, or *die Seiendheit*), “thing” (= *res* = *das Ding*, or *die Washeit* = *die Sachlichkeit*), “something” (= *aliquid* = *das Etwas*, or *die Etwasheit*, i.e., *die Abgegrenztheit gegenüber jedes andere*), “one” (= *unum* = *das Eine*, or *die Einheit*, i.e., *die innere Untrennbarkeit der wesentlichen Bestimmungen*), “true” (= *verum* = *das Wahre*, or *die Wahrheit* = *die Erkennbarkeit* = *die Geistbezogenheit*), “good” (= *bonum* = *das Gute*, or *die Werthhaftigkeit* = *die Erstrebbarkeit* = *die Willensbezogenheit*). Sometimes, especially in the Franciscan schools, there was added “beauty” (= *pulchrum* = *das Schöne*, or *die Schönheit*, i.e., *die mühlosselbstverständliche Übereinstimmung mit dem Anschauungsvermögen*). Because all of these concepts have the same completely unrestricted scope as the concept “being,” they are all said to be “convertible” with it, and it with them.

In later scholastic and neoscholastic philosophy, the term “transcendental” often has the same meaning as the term “transcendent,” i.e., going beyond the limits of all classes and kinds, and hence all univocal meaning, to analogy. Hence “*transcendentia*” are also called “*transcendentalia*.”

Kant gives the term “transcendental” a new, distinctively different meaning when he calls all knowledge “transcendental” insofar as it has to do, not with objects, but with our way of knowing objects, to the extent that such knowledge is possible a priori. Thus “transcendental” does not designate something that goes beyond experience—for that, Kant simply uses “transcendent”—but rather something prior to experience that nonetheless has no purpose other than to make knowledge based on experience possible. Accordingly, the contrasting term to “transcendental,” as he uses it, is “empirical.”

In scholastic usage, on the other hand, the contrasting term is “categorical,” including “general,” “special,” and so on.

Of course, in the background of all this is Aristotle, who defines metaphysics, or “first philosophy,” as the study of being *qua* being, which is to say, the study of being as such together with its essential attributes. To say that something *is* is also to say that it is *one*, so that unity is an essential attribute of being and convertible with it. Just as being is found in all the categories, so also is unity. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle remarks that goodness, also, is applicable in all the categories. Therefore, in the terms of the later scholastic philosophers, unity and goodness are transcendental attributes of being, since, in being applicable in all categories, they are confined to none and do not constitute genera.

Of especial interest so far as my own metaphysical reflections are concerned is the doctrine of *transcendentia* developed by Duns Scotus. For him, the *passiones entis* (= attributes of being) include both *passiones e. convertibiles*, such as one, true, and good, and *passiones e. disjunctæ*, such as necessary / contingent (*sc.* possible) and act / potency, both of which are “transcendent” attributes. Moreover, the concept “being,” and thus the concepts of its attributes, are univocal, in the sense that they belong to being either “as indifferent to finite and [infinite],” in the case of the convertible attributes,” or as including both finite and infinite, act and potency, and so on, in the case of the disjunctive attributes.

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