Ontological positions

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Abstract

Our aim in this foundational chapter is to explore some of the main ways that ontology – that is to say the study of being – is relevant to translation. We begin by considering the importance of being in broad terms and the peculiar difficulty of attempting to reflect on it directly. This is followed by reflection on a series of major concepts in the history of Western ontology: categories and categorization; sameness, difference and identity; change and stability; being and non-being. The final section introduces three major traditions of ontological thought: substance ontology, process ontology, and flat ontology. We aim to show throughout that the ontological positions we adopt have significant implications for how we think about translation and that there is much to be gained from explicit reflection on questions of being.

Ontological foundations

To inquire into ontology is to ask questions at the most basic level – about the nature of being itself. It means asking what it really means to say that something exists. As such, ontology is concerned with everything that "is". This makes it further reaching than every other area of study. Not everything can think, act or be moral but every thing, whether real or imagined, in some way is. Ontological assumptions, more often implicit than explicitly formulated, provide the ground from which knowledge, thought and action follow. What translation is, for instance, is an ontological question with significant implications for thought and practice. If a text has a "spirit", it is possible – and sensible – to think of translation in terms of transfer. But if translation is the basis of all semiosis, and semiosis is extended beyond human language to encompass all "physical-chemical-biological" interaction and more, as Kobus Marais (2019) has it, then the idea of translation as transfer makes little sense. Questions about what translation is themselves ultimately come back to deeper ontological questions. Speaking of the spirit of the text comes down to an ontology of essences and the idea that the truth lies

hidden beneath the surface – in Immanuel Kant's terms, in *noumena* (things-in-themselves) rather than *phenomena* (things-as-they-appear). Marais's approach, on the other hand, is grounded in a relational, secular ontology inspired by the New Materialism of Terrence Deacon.

If approaches in translation studies embrace a wide range of ontological stances, a bewildering array of approaches can be found among philosophers. The Western line of recorded thought about ontology is longer than almost any other, stretching back over 2,000 years to the Ancient Greeks. Perhaps more significantly still, thought from that time continues to exert enormous influence on contemporary thinking. Galen's "humoral" theory of medicine, for instance, has long since been abandoned, but Plato's ideas on the nature of being remain profoundly influential, in both academic and broader circles. The sheer bulk of material and range of approaches that have been developed make any attempt to account chronologically – as is common in our own relatively young discipline – for developments in thinking on ontology simply impossible. With that in mind, and given the focus of the volume in which this chapter features, our goals are more modest. First, we explore some of the key issues in the study of ontology, considering both the challenges and the importance of addressing the question(s) of being. Second, we offer an introduction to a series of key ontological ideas. Third, we give an overview of several major traditions of thinking in ontology. Limitations of space, and in our own knowledge, mean that the second and third sections in particular are highly selective; they address only a small subset of ideas from Western thinking on ontology. Nonetheless, they were not chosen at random and we have emphasised ideas and thinkers who seem, to us at least, to offer ideas of real value to translation scholars.

Issues with the study of ontology

The opening paragraphs aimed to show that getting a grip on our ontological assumptions is a desirable first step in most scholarly inquiry. Yet if ontology is uniquely valuable in understanding everything that is, it is also uniquely difficult to study. Rather than asking about specific beings – whether we are talking about translation or people, rocks or emotions – it asks about being itself. This makes it unavoidably abstract. Ontology resists quantification more strongly than almost any other area of inquiry. Physics is concerned with the study and quantification of the material world and phenomena such as gravity, chemical reactions and stars. Metaphysics (as one major approach to ontology), on the other hand, asks what makes gravity different from a chemical reaction and what makes a star a star rather than a squirrel.

These questions to some extent might be approached by measuring and calculation, but they can never be reduced to them. Moreover, the copula "is" is clearly employed in a very diverse range of senses. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (2000), for example, Martin Heidegger offers extended meditations on "being and becoming", "being and seeming", "being and thinking" and "being and the ought", arguing that each constitutes an important aspect of being, without it ever being reducible to any one of them.[1]

Ontology provides the ground for other areas of study but cannot be fully separated from them. To ask what it is for something to exist inevitably means asking questions about how things appear, what knowledge human interpreters can have of them, what is valuable and what is not and so on. The questions it raises are frequently uncomfortable because they have implications far beyond scholarly inquiry. If I accept poststructuralist ideas on the essential indeterminacy of being, where does that leave me in terms of how I live and think about my own existence more generally? If I accept Christian teaching on the idea that God is ultimate first cause of everything, where does that leave the belief – widely upheld in translation studies these days – that searching for the original or true meaning of anything is to search for something which does not ultimately exist? If I accept the rationalist position that everything which exists is amenable to being completely understood, must I see myself as having failed if I cannot understand everything that happens in my life? To ask such questions inevitably means encroaching on matters of faith, belief and commitment.

The fields in which ontology has been most directly addressed are philosophy and theology – two areas in which the question of being assumes central importance. Yet even within these disciplines, ontology's status as ground complicates attempts to study and bring it clearly into view. It has a tendency to slip from grasp and resist radical critique. Friedrich Nietzsche, writing in the late 19th century, for example, argued that the history of ontology in Europe was essentially one of repetition and continuity:

> 'Things of the highest value must have a different origin, an origin of *their* own; they cannot de derived from this perishable, seductive, deceptive, lowly world, from this confusion of desire and delusion! Rather, their basis must lie in the womb of existence, in the imperishable, in the hidden god, in the "thing in itself"—and nowhere else!' Judgements of this kind constitute the typical prejudice by which we can always recognise the metaphysicians of every age; this kind of value judgement is at the back of all their logical

[1] See also the chapter in the same volume titled "On the Grammar and Etymology of the Word 'Being'" for a detailed exploration of the range of ways in which "being" has been understood in Europe since the time of the Ancient Greeks.

> proceedings; from out of this 'belief' of theirs, they go about seeking their 'knowledge', which they end by ceremoniously dubbing 'the truth' (Nietzsche 1998: 6)

He argues that that despite the array of approaches developed across history, they are ultimately reducible to a single recurrent trope: the idea that truth must lie in some way beyond appearances, whether in the early Greeks' understanding of being, the emphasis on eternal essences in Plato, the theological beliefs of medieval Christianity, or Enlightenment-era thinking exemplified by Kant. We will return to some of these specific approaches later on. For now the key point is to emphasise the difficulty of thinking ontology in new ways. After all, if thinkers such as Kant and Thomas Aquinas were unable to move much beyond the approaches they inherited, what chance do we have in translation studies?

Even in philosophy, then, ontology often features largely in terms of basic assumptions rather than staying consistently in view as a subject of discussion and research in its own right. Beyond philosophy, the tendency of ontology to slip into the background is even stronger. This is certainly the case in translation studies where it is rare to see ontology addressed directly or discussed in detail. The main reason for this is that issues of being/existing/becoming are frequently taken to be self-evident. Rather than being deemed insufficiently important to warrant discussion, it seems likely that in many cases they are simply not considered at all. Nonetheless, they have important implications for the kind of questions that are asked and the conclusions that can be drawn. Approaches which see translation as a science, for instance, rely on the ontological assumptions of rationalism: the basic idea that translation (and everything else that exists) has an inherently logical structure. This, in turn, enables the epistemological assumption that that structure can be identified through the application of reason. This assumption is not necessarily wrong – after all, rationalist assumptions are the building blocks for all scientific inquiry and have proven extraordinarily productive in many fields. Even so, we propose that such assumptions should not be made in a blind way.

Where attempts to address ontology *are* made by translation scholars, on the other hand, they have not always been wholly successful. The analytical traditions in translation studies inspired by narrative theory and critical discourse analysis, for example, are different in important ways. Nonetheless, both suffer from a tendency to slide into a kind of naïve constructionism, with language understood as simply creating reality. A much-used quotation in work inspired by Critical Discourse Analysis, for instance, announces that "from a discourse-theoretical point of view, it is … not the subject who makes the discourses, but the discourses that make the subject … The subject is of interest not as an actor, but as a product of discourses"

(Jäger and Maier 2010: 37). Our purpose here is not to criticise scholars working in these traditions, both of which have proven extremely valuable for translation research. On the contrary, these researchers are to be celebrated for engaging with such questions at all. Nonetheless, the difficulties they face highlight some of the key problems with engaging with ontology: (1) a tendency for positions initially offered tentatively and with lots of caveats to quickly turn to unassailable orthodoxies, uncritically passed down through the tradition; and (2) the difficulty of outlining a clearly defined and workable ontological position without being drawn into complex and highly abstract areas of inquiry that seem rather distant from the original focus.[2]

The preceding discussion, then, might seem to leave us in an impossible situation. We need to get our ontological assumptions straight but almost inevitably run into trouble when trying to do so. Rather than leading to disillusionment, however, it is precisely this difficulty that makes ontology so fascinating. The fact it is so difficult to get a firm grip on it is not a reason not to try. Nor is an absolutely clear position necessarily what is needed: a bit of insight can go a long way towards making reality somewhat less murky (as Jürgen Habermas would define the intellectual's task) and towards opening up new avenues for inquiry, allowing new questions to be asked and old questions to be re-thought in new ways. With this in mind, the aim of the following section is to discuss some of the most relevant ideas and concepts in the Western ontological tradition. We will explore how they have been understood and look at their, typically unrecognised, legacy within translation studies.

Key ontological concepts

Categories and categorization

Categorization is a way of organizing our experience that precedes conscious thought and language. It is a way of dealing with the complexity of the world. Indeed, "one of the most basic functions of all organisms is the cutting up of the environment into classifications by which non-identical stimuli can be treated as equivalent" (Rosch et al. 1976: 382). Their survival and success depend on their ability to settle questions such as "Is this food or non-food? A friend or a foe? A chance or a threat?" in a timely and accurate manner. Timeliness is important because both opportunities and dangers often arise rapidly and unexpectedly; as a result, many acts of basic categorization are quick, near-instinctive reactions rather than

[2] We write this from personal experience: when Sadler's *Fragmented Narrative* (2021) was first conceived, ontology played a considerable before ultimately becoming its primary focus.

conscious decisions. When there is less time pressure, though, and with sufficient cognitive skills and resources, chances for accurate categorization may be increased by a careful analysis of the data against the available body of knowledge and pool of experience, both individual and collective. It is here that fundamental ontological assumptions about "what things are" or "how things can be" become directly relevant. Of course, at this level, reflection involves assessment of evidence and inferential reasoning and therefore becomes entangled with phenomenological and epistemological considerations. Inasmuch as it is possible to isolate an ontological thread in the question "How can we know things for what they are?" by focussing mostly on its latter part, several approaches present themselves as potential responses.

Before we discuss each of these approaches, some preliminary points must be made. Categorization proceeds by comparison. This involves recognizing similarities and differences, and assessing to what extent they are relevant and important in grouping entities together as members of the same category, or contrasting them as representing different categories. This process is fundamentally translational in the sense embraced throughout this book – as "work performed to constrain a semiosic process", it both depends on certain constraints and contributes to establishing them. Categorizing means translating: studying two separate things to establish how they are related to one another, what they share, and therefore whether and how one can stand in place of another – that is, represent it. Viewed this way, the basic ontological questions about various ways of being are, above all, categorizing and translational questions. "What is this"? is a call to perceive, identify, compare, and assign to a certain category. When we respond by saying "It is a kind of X", we categorize and therefore translate. To formulate this response, we need to be aware what options – and what *kinds of options* – are available.

One approach to categorization in the Western tradition, and the first one to be theorized, can be traced back to several influential ancient Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle, and is therefore often labelled classical. This label has dual meaning: under the connotative layer ("classical" as ancient, original, dominant, mainstream, and so on) lies the basic concept of class. Based largely on the observation of the natural world, both animate and inanimate, this categorization model is concerned with the correct assignment of beings to appropriate classes. At the highest level, these are extremely broad and abstract. In his work *Categories*, Aristotle lists ten kinds into which entities in the world divide, namely: (1) substance; (2) quantity; (3) quality; (4) relation; (5) place; (6) date; (7) posture; (8) state; (9) action; and (10) passion (Thomasson 2019; Studtmann 2021). These distinctions seek to capture different kinds of being or indeed different senses in which things may be said "to be".

As the most fundamental category in the classical view and a conceptual cornerstone of a major ontological tradition, substance will be discussed in detail later but what concerns us here is the basic principle of classical categorization. With some oversimplification, we can say that Aristotelian classes have clearly defined boundaries and are mutually exclusive. Assignment to classes proceeds along a series of binary questions isolating a critical difference. For example, "mobile substances" are differentiated into "eternal" (i.e. heavens) and "destructible" (i.e. sublunary bodies); the latter into "unensouled (i.e. elements) and "ensouled" (i.e. living things); the latter further into "incapable of perception" (i.e. plants) and "capable of perception" (i.e. animals); and the latter into "irrational" (i.e. non-human animals) and "rational" (i.e. humans) (Studtmann 2021). Structurally, this categorization is arborescent (that is, it resembles a tree with a system of bifurcating branches) and hierarchical. Axiologically, it pursues clarity and simplicity, and eschews ambiguity. Logically, it is committed to binarism, viewed as the ultimate method of analysis and expressed in its maxim *tertium non datur* ("there is no third [option]").

Class membership is determined on the basis of compliance with necessary and sufficient conditions; once these are satisfied, there is no internal gradation between members of the same category. For example, in the classical view, humans may be either free or enslaved, noble or common, male or female – but not simultaneously both or neither; likewise, no degrees of freedom, nobility or gender are recognized. Classical categories bring with them a promise of universal validity, permanence and completeness. There is usually no admission of a constructed character of these classes, and their cultural or ideological inflection. They are typically viewed as ontologically autonomous and self-evident; as something given, observed or discovered, and thus in some way pre-existing the act of categorization. In translation studies, traces of a classical view of categorization – though not necessarily in its extreme form – may be found in some attempts to systematize the field, such as the famous Holmes-Toury "map" and various other taxonomies. Indeed, classical categorization provides ontological footing for efforts to "chart waters" and "map territories" which, by definition, seek to be maximally exhaustive, leave no areas unaccounted for, do not allow overlaps, and tend to draw crisp boundaries. In the guise of zero-sum thinking, it is also the logic of percentages, pie charts, and clines (see Blumczynski and Hassani 2019).

But classifying entities based on an internalized checklist of sufficient and necessary conditions is not the only possible – or indeed, the most "natural" or intuitively immediate – way of understanding what and how things around us are. In the last half-century, extensive research in psychology and linguistics has highlighted the power of prototype as a central

categorizing and cognitive mechanism. One of the pioneers of this approach, Eleanor Rosch, hypothesized and empirically demonstrated that even such basic domains as form and colour – as well as many others – are structured around perceptually salient "natural prototypes" (1973). Against the analytical, ever-bifurcating drive of a classical approach, Rosch and her collaborators accepted the premise that "the world is structured because real-world attributes do not occur independently of each other" (1976: 383) but are clustered and patterned, which results in the emergence of prototypes. There is something refreshingly commonsensical in their observation that "[c]reatures with feathers are more likely to also have wings than creatures with fur, and objects with the visual appearance of chairs are more likely to have functional sit-on-ableness than objects with the appearance of cats" (Rosch et al. 1976: 383). Our idea of what and how things are is therefore a function of our complex, embodied, multi-sensory, both intuitive and rational engagement with our environment – in short, our cognitive translation of "a virtually infinite number of discriminably different stimuli" (ibid., 382) that make up the world, into manageable and meaningful groupings. The resulting categories are internally graded. Some members are better examples of their class than others, and thus may be said to occupy a central, prototypical position within it. Others are less typical, and in this sense more peripheral. For example, a chair with four legs and a backrest – the kind usually found in kitchens, dining rooms or libraries – is a more likely prototype for the abstract category CHAIR than, say, a swivel chair, high chair, armchair, or wheelchair. In fact, while a wheelchair may in some ways be considered a chair, it would often be more readily categorized as a VEHICLE rather than FURNITURE (of which CHAIR would be a subset).

This illustrates several important principles. Categories are clear at the centre but become fuzzy at the periphery; there is usually some overlap between adjacent classes, which means that both partial and multiple class membership is possible – a wholesale rejection of *tertium non datur*. Whether a knife is a UTENSIL, a TOOL or a WEAPON depends on what purpose it is used for. Tomatoes and peppers are commonly regarded as VEGETABLES, even though, according to botanical criteria, they are undoubtedly FRUITS (since they develop from flowers and contain seeds). Prototype-based categorization is thus guided by salience, frequency, familiarity, expertise, context, perspective, intention, purpose, and countless other factors – some relatively stable, others emerging *ad hoc*. This view is sympathetic to variation and partiality; it permits ambiguity, paradox, and some degree of uncertainty. Various categories are related to one another but in more complex ways than through simple inclusion and bifurcation. Prototypes may be thought of as forming constellations subject to gravitational and magnetic pulls, or as local nodes in a rhizome. Even if we momentarily take the narrow sense

of translation as a phenomenon involving language – whether this deserves to continue being the "prototypical" sense is debated throughout this very volume – questions of categorization are not easily settled. For example, is translation a form of rewriting or vice versa? What is the superordinate category: translation or interpreting? Where does translation end and adaptation start? How firmly can the boundaries between source and target text be established? Once we give up the demand for or the expectation of a neat, orderly, and non-contradictory world, we are prepared to accept some fuzzy, uncertain, and partial answers about what and how things are as resulting not so much from ignorance or lack of scholarly rigour, but rather from the complex and chaotic ways of being (cf. Marais and Maylaerts 2019a).

Even though, as superordinate categories, vegetables, music and games are abstract products of human thinking processes and, in one sense, "do not really exist", yet eating vegetables, listening to music, and playing games are perfectly ordinary parts of our everyday experience, or at least the way we think and speak about it. This explains why issues of categorization and conceptualization have always been of central interest to philosophers and linguists. Language works by categorization and abstraction – the same word is used to designate ontically separate entities[3] – and interlingual translation is an especially fertile ground for categorization debates because it constantly exposes mismatches and discontinuities between various linguistic and conceptual systems. In the famous words of Edward Sapir, "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same worlds with different labels attached" (1964[1929]: 69). Although this observation has often been caricaturised as implying linguistic determinism and ultimate untranslatability, it does so only from a strictly classical perspective in which distinctions are crisp and absolute, and labels firmly attached. But sameness and difference themselves may be scalar, relative and emergent, which leads us to another cluster of concepts extending into the ontological domain.

Sameness, difference, and identity

If the world is a practically infinite collection of various entities and events which we perceive in the flux of experience, to speak of two (or more) of them as "the same" or "identical" is to group them together as a "kind of something" of a higher order – namely, a category. But

[3] This may also be considered from an individual, existential perspective: "Becoming a subject of language, means becoming subjected to a framework of worldliness that language incorporates. By becoming occupied by language, you are unavoidably alienated: What is yours, and yours only – ownmost or authentic as Heidegger would put it – can only be seen and become expressible in a language given to you ready-made, created by *others*. The subject of language is a split or *divided* subject" (Tombras 2019: 104–105; original emphasis).

categories, as we have seen, may be structured in different ways. What do we mean, then, by declaring that two entities are "the same"? Usually, that they share some abstract quality deemed salient or relevant: for example, shape, size, colour, weight, position, value, function, and so on. Some of these qualities are reminiscent of Aristotle's fundamental categories mentioned above, whose usefulness becomes obvious now; clearly, we must have some pre-existing standard of roundness, greenness, largeness, and so on in order to conclude that, say, two green apples are "the same" in any of these respects. But compliance with that abstract standard is a matter of degree, and this is where prototypes apply: no real apples are perfectly round or uniformly green, yet some will be rounder or greener than others. Somewhat paradoxically, sameness cannot be separated from difference, which starts with a fundamental ontological distinction. The expression "X is the same" is linguistically, logically, and ontologically incomplete unless it is followed by "… as Y". "Sameness implies the relation of 'with', that is, a mediation, a connection, a synthesis: the unification into a unity" (Heidegger 1969: 23). This means that "two beings which are the same are both like and unlike one another" (White 1980: 112). In Heidegger's view, sameness is "the belonging together of what is distinct through the gathering by means of difference"; therefore, declaring sameness involves "holding together and holding apart from another" (White 1980: 110–111). What is worth noting here is the vocabulary of engagement, pointing us away from an ahistorical, static ontology in which "man as the rational animal … has become a subject for his objects" (Heidegger 1969: 32). On the contrary, being is "a question of world disclosure, historicity and language" (Tombras 2019: 44) – difference is *gathered*, sameness is *held*. In a philosophical version of the observer's paradox, "when we think of something, the act of thinking itself changes the nature of the thing thought about" (Griffiths 2017: 331; see Heidegger 1969: 23). Even that most fundamental dimension of sameness which is often called identity – namely, a relationship of an entity with itself across time – involves mediation and is predicated on change. From one moment to the next, bits of matter are not static collections of particles and atoms; the ontological stability of abstract entities such as ideas, concepts, signs, texts, words, views, positions, and so on is even more unlikely. What do we mean when we say that something, let alone someone, is "the same" as they were a second ago or yesterday? One of the reasons why the concept of equivalence, once the inevitable pillar of mainstream theories of translation, has practically disappeared from scholarly accounts – as evidenced, for instance, by the absence of this entry in the 3rd edition of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (2020) – is its inadequacy to account for these complexities which we will now consider.

Change and stability

A key concern in accounts of being for thousands of years has been the respective roles of change and stability. We find in the writings of Parmenides and Heraclitus, for example, some of the earliest Greek philosophical writings to have survived to the present day and which pre-date the introduction of the term *ontology* itself by around two centuries, discussion of precisely this issue. Despite the complexity of their thought, each subsequently came to embody an opposing stance on the nature of being: the former emphasising stability, the latter change. As Heidegger (2000: 102) puts it:

> [for Parmenides] Being indicates itself … as the proper self-collected perdurance of the constant, undisturbed by restlessness and change. Even today, in accounts of the inception of Western philosophy, it is customary to oppose Parmenides' teaching to that of Heraclitus: *phanta rhei*, all is in flux.

From the beginnings of philosophy, then, thinkers have sought to reconcile the obvious fact that everything changes with the intuitive sense that, despite that change, somehow things also continue to be what they are. The cells in my body may constantly die and be replaced, but I am still in some sense me. A rock may erode over time and change its colour and shape, but it is still in some sense the same rock.

If the problem is longstanding, we must also recognise that stability has held a privileged position in relation to change in in Western accounts of being for thousands of years. Perhaps the most important reason for this is the extraordinary influence of Plato's theory of Forms. At its most basic, Plato argued[4] that understanding what anything truly *is* means getting beyond how it appears to the senses. He justifies this by arguing that being ultimately lies in "ideas" or ideal "Forms"[5] which transcend their manifestation in any individual being – Beauty, Bigness, Virtue and so on. The forms are transcendent because they go beyond any material iteration; the ideal Form is not the sum or composite of all existing things that are large or beautiful. Rather than largeness being a property which can be abstracted from concrete things which are understood to be large, Plato considered that individual things could only be large

[4] The conception of Forms introduced here has been strongly associated with Plato for centuries. It is important to note, however, that these ideas come principally from the middle part of his life and are critiqued in his later works, such as the *Sophist* and *Parmenides.*

[5] To distinguish between Plato's understanding of Forms and the way that "form" has traditionally been understood in translation studies in opposition to "content", the former is capitalised and the latter is not.

by "partaking" in Largeness, deemed to pre-exist and enable the possibility for any individual thing to be large.

For the present discussion, the key point is Plato's distinction between the transience of visible, concrete things and the permanence of the Forms of which they partake:

> [Can] the Beautiful itself, each thing in itself, the real, ever be affected by any change whatever? Or does each of them that really is, being uniform by itself, remain the same and never in any way tolerate any change whatever? It must remain the same, said Cebes, and in the same state, Socrates. What of the many beautiful particulars, be they men, horses, clothes, or other such things, or the many equal particulars, and all those which bear the same name as those others? Do they remain the same or, in total contrast to those other realities, one might say, never in any way remain the same as themselves or in relation to each other? The latter is the case; they are never in the same state. (*Phaedo* 78c-e)

He was emphatic that the task of the philosopher lay in coming to know the Forms: to know what something really is means getting past changeable concrete manifestations to the unchanging Forms underpinning them. He was equally emphatic that appearances are deceptive and do not offer an easy path to the Forms:

> Then what about the actual acquiring of knowledge? Is the body an obstacle when one associates with it in the search for knowledge? I mean, for example, do men find any truth in sight or hearing, or are not even the poets forever telling us that we do not see or hear anything accurately, and surely if those two physical senses are not clear or precise, our other senses can hardly be accurate, as they are all inferior to these (*Phaedo* 65a-b)

Change therefore comes to be seen with suspicion on the basis that it leads away from genuine knowledge of being. On the other hand, true knowledge of the Forms, of what truly is, could only be apprehended through the operation of pure reason on the basis that "if we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself" (*Phaedo* 66d-e). Plato's approach, then, is grounded in a fundamental distinction between being and seeming, constancy and change, with a clear mistrust in both cases of the latter and privileging of the former. This approach has had an enormous impact on Western thinking about language and translation. As Piers Rawling and Philip Wilson put it in their introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Translation and Philosophy,* "mainstream concepts of the 'original' and its idealised relationship with translation are still very much reminiscent of Plato's theory of Forms and its devaluation of representations" (2019: 4).

The distinction between (changeable) "form" and (constant) "content", for instance, rests on the idea that what anything really *is* (i.e. its unchanging essence) transcends its appearance (i.e. its textual characteristics). This has implications for the way we think of the possibility or impossibility of equivalence. Although languages vary greatly, a term in one language can be understood as genuinely equivalent to a term in another language, say *table* in English and *mesa* in Spanish, if all possible and imagined tables ultimately partake of the same set of universal Forms. Consequently, it does not matter if tables typically look different in English-speaking and Spanish-speaking contexts since these differences operate only on the level of appearances; once we get past appearances, they can be understood as the same. The same can be said of textual material – if the words on the page are understood as mere visible appearance, what a text truly is somehow invisible, lies beyond and is irreducible to those words.

Over the centuries this approach has evolved while remaining largely unchanged in its basic assumptions. In the context of biblical translation, as with Eugene A. Nida, what is holy about the Bible is not the words themselves (perhaps in part because they are almost always accessed through translation) but the *message* of which the words are merely a bearer. What truly matters, and what the Bible *is*, lies in its message – a distinction between the Bible (as text) and the gospel (as idea). This example brings us back to the centrality of belief in questions of ontology. Nida's position is wholly consistent with the ontological stances underpinning much of Christian theology. The problematic subsequent application of Nida's ideas in very different contexts speaks to the dangers of not paying attention to ontological assumptions. His stance is wholly inconsistent, for instance, with Islamic beliefs regarding the Qur'an whereby the message and specific words included in the holy text are regarded as an indissoluble unity. Again, this is an ontological issue: the Qur'an *is* both the language used and the divine message it communicates, making a separation between untrustworthy form and sacred content impossible.

With romantic hermeneutics, on the other hand, it is the individual genius and intention of the author which somehow lies beyond those parts of the text that are actually visible. An ideal translation, then, would first identify that genius, spirit or essence before communicating it with new words to a new audience. The recurrent notion of "equivalent effect", meanwhile, does away with God or an author's genius while still holding to the idea of the truth of a text lying, invisibly, beyond and behind what is visible and apparent. Different as these approaches are, Plato's ontological emphasis on stability runs through them all.

Each also exhibits the ontological assumptions of what Jacques Derrida calls "the metaphysics of presence" – the idea that if we study anything hard enough, whether a text or any other object of interpretation, we can get past variable appearances and the stable core (what he terms "the transcendental signified") will be rendered "present", perceptible without any distorting representations. Reaching "the transcendental signified … would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign" (Derrida 1974: 49).[6] From this perspective, the task of the translator becomes the making-present of that transcendental signified, the stable core somehow behind and beyond the text. Perhaps ironically, many traditional critiques of translation grounded in the ontological assumptions of the metaphysics of presence ultimately strongly foreground change in their accounts of translation. The betrayal at the heart of *traduttore, traditore* lies in the translator's inevitable failure to maintain stability. The ideal translation as a perfectly clear pane of glass or the translator acting as a conduit are likewise grounded in a desire for the translation to make the original present at the same time as almost lamenting the impossibility of doing so. Such approaches establish the idea that translation *should* be about stability but, in practice, *is* about change – even if that change is understood as highly undesirable.

Stability, then, dominated approaches to ontology in the West for millennia, and continues to underpin popular understandings of being that inform a great deal of academic inquiry beyond philosophy. Nonetheless, understanding being in such terms came under increasing criticism in the latter part of the 19th century from philosophers such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Peirce and throughout the 20th with thinkers such as Heidegger, Ricoeur, Nancy, Lyotard, Laclau, Bakhtin and Derrida. Diverse as they are, all advanced perspectives that shifted the emphasis in their accounts of being away from stability and towards becoming and happening. All rejected the idea of there being transcendental ideal forms or signifieds in favour of viewpoints which emphasise change and relationality.

Over time, these ontological assumptions have also entered thinking about translation. As the idea of the stable transcendental signified fades in importance, it becomes possible to conceive of translations as existing in their own right, rather than purely as an unavoidably inadequate representation of a stable meaning. We see this, for instance, in the "manipulation school" spearheaded by André Lefevere and developments in polysystem theory led by Itamar

[6] It bears noting that Derrida's critique (explicitly aimed at what he terms 'onto-theology') is grounded as strongly in faith as it is in reason. From a Christian, Muslim or Jewish viewpoint, God's status as the origin of all things means that there *must* be a transcendental signified even if opinions vary as to the possibility of its being comprehended or made present by mortals.

Even-Zohar from the late 1970s, for example, both of which, in different ways, aim to shift the focus from complaining about the introduction of changes through translation – a mainstay of translation criticism to the present day – towards analysing those shifts as something worth studying in their own right. As Lefevere has it:

> The situation changes dramatically if we stop lamenting the fact that "the Brechtian 'era' in England stood under the aegis not of Brecht himself but of various second-hand ideas and concepts *about* Brecht, an image of Brecht created from misunderstandings and misconceptions" … and, quite simply, accept it as a fact of literature – or even life. How many lives, after all, have been deeply affected by translations of the Bible and the *Capital*? (Lefevere 2000: 234)

He grounds this argument explicitly in a desire to move away from romanticism and its emphasis on authorial intent as the ultimate origin, meaning, and point of stability for any work of literature. Lefevere's argument is not simply that the stable origin is not the only thing that matters nor the epistemological idea that it is not methodologically possible to ascertain the point of stability. Instead, he argues that any text *is* its refractions and representations; change and transformation move from the periphery to the centre. Plato and his successors' emphasis on stability over change is reversed, with the focus shifting towards appearances as the key to understanding being.

As this shift in ontological assumptions has become more established, the attentions of translation scholars have continued to move. Activist translation, as an example of a now major field of research, lays the emphasis on how translation can contribute to, or impede, fluid activist agendas. Approaches inspired by Actor-Network Theory similarly set aside stable being in favour of seeing translation, translations and translators as nodes within constantly redefined networks. Growing interest in rewritings and retranslations stresses the extent to which even apparently fixed texts never truly settle but are rather swept up in an ongoing process of becoming. Bourdieusian approaches, common in translation studies for almost two decades, see what anything is as a function of complex and changing interactions between field, capital and habitus. There has been little explicit reflection on questions of being by translation scholars over this period but it is clear that the discipline's ontological underpinnings have evolved substantially.

Being and non-being

If it is difficult to speak with clarity about being, it is even more challenging to speak about non-being. It has, nonetheless, been a topic of explicit discussion among philosophers since at least the time of the Ancient Greeks. Plato's dialogue "The Sophist", for instance, features an extended exploration of non-being, taking as its starting point Parmenides' earlier statement that "never will you show that not-being is", and ultimately attempting to "insist by brute force both that *that which is not* somehow is, and then again that *that which is* somehow is not" (*Sophist* 241d). Georg Hegel (2010), meanwhile, sets up being and non-being as the equal poles of a dialectic, with each including and requiring the other. Jean-Paul Sartre's extended treatment of non-being in *Being and Nothingness*, on the other hand, argues that "nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being – like a worm" (1957: 21). Deleuze describes the problem thus:

> In seeking to dispel the negative, we declare ourselves satisfied if we show that being is full positive reality which admits no non-being; conversely, in seeking to ground negation, we are satisfied if we manage to posit, in being itself or in relation to being, some sort of non-being … The alternative is thus the following: either there is no non-being and negation is illusory and ungrounded, or there is non-being, which puts the negative in being and grounds negation. (Deleuze 1994: 79)

Clearly, then, non-being, and its relationship to being, is not an easy (no)thing to get a handle on. Despite this difficulty, and the knots it can tie us in, the notion of non-being has been philosophically productive. Non-being plays an important role, for example, in Heidegger's account of the temporal nature of existence in *Being and Time* (2010). Central to his argument is that past, present and future constitute an "ecstatic" unity, belonging together in the first instance and only separable after the fact. Anything that is, exists in the present in terms of both having-been (which it now is not) and that which has not yet come to pass: "things past and things future belong to time. The former are *no longer*, the latter are *not yet*. Past and future have the character of a nullity" (Heidegger 1982: 233). He illustrates this with the example of an unripe fruit: it is what it is on account of its possible future ripeness, even if it is, as yet, not ripe. As he describes it, "the not-yet is already included in its own being, by no means as an arbitrary determination, but as a constituent" (Heidegger 2010: 235). The same idea, he suggests, applies to human existence – to understand what it is to be the person that anybody is, we must also take into account what they might become and the future possibilities in relation to which they live their life. As Heidegger puts it: "Dasein [Heidegger's term for the uniquely human way of existing], *is always already its not-yet* as long as it is" (2010: 235). But even when we set aside the temporal dimension, existence and non-existence, presence and

absence, are intertwined: in Heidegger's famous example from his essay "The Thing" (1971), a jug is defined by the void it holds. Or could it be that the void shapes the jug around itself?

Non-being also plays an important role in writing likely to be more familiar to translation scholars. Saussurean linguistics, a key touch point for much 20th century writing on language, conceptualises language as a system in which signs are defined not by any positive characteristics but by their differences from other signs. Their being is recognised in terms of that which they are not. In a different way, Derrida (1974) identifies the non-being of the transcendental signified as central to the operation of signification. It is never possible to find our way back to the originary presence of the transcendental signified because, he argues, there *is* no transcendental signified. Nonetheless, he proposes that it continues to be crucial even in its own non-being, with "writing" (which Derrida understands in a somewhat idiosyncratic way) acting as a "trace" of an "absent presence" which functions as an object of desire even as it does not exist. It can play a structural function, and introduce play into the structure, without having any positive existence of its own. From a rather different perspective again, the accounts of distanciation found in Gadamer (1989) and Ricoeur (1976) argue that, in written material, the absence of an interlocutor produces a "surplus of meaning". Because the producers of pieces of writing typically are *not* there when these are interpreted, "the text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what they author meant when he wrote it" (Ricoeur 1976: 30). It is the non-being of the author in a text that allows the text to have a being of its own. For Sartre, notions such as absence, change, otherness, repulsion, regret, distraction, and so on demonstrate that "there is an infinite number of realities which are not only objects of judgment, but which are experienced, opposed, feared, etc., by the human being and which in their inner structure are inhabited by negation, as by a necessary condition of their existence" (Sartre 1957: 21).

Non-being has not been a specific focus of discussion within translation studies. Yet the idea does play an important role in several major debates in the discipline. Much criticism of translation and many accounts of the supposed impossibility of translation are grounded not so much in what translation is as a practice or what specific translations are but rather in what they are not: translation is to be understood as a "second-order" activity because a translation can never be that which it translates. This mirrors Sartre's stance on the need to recognise being as something separate from God as creator, arguing that "being … can only affirm itself as distinct from and opposed to its creator; otherwise it dissolves in him … [E]ven if it has been created, being-in-itself would be inexplicable in terms of creation; for it assumes its being beyond the creation" (1957: lxiv).

The longstanding aim of recognising translations as existing and having value in their own right can be seen as grounded in the same type of move. Allowing translations, whether linguistic or not, to step out of the shadow of their origins enables them to be recognised as existing in their own right, an existence which does not rely on their origin. They can come into view in terms of their own being rather than their alleged non-being. At the same time, this means that translations can no longer be explained in terms of what they translate – in being what they are, their being must exceed what they are not.

Many other concepts which run through contemporary thinking about translation, and which transcend the discipline's traditional linguistic focus, meanwhile, also raise difficult questions of being and non-being. For something to be absent requires not only for it to not be there but for it to be encountered in terms of its not being there. For something to have changed it must no longer be as it was.[7] For somebody to be other, they must not be the self – at least not only self. We see all these issues arise in the context of translation. Translation confronts us with the not-being-there of what is translated. Rather than simple indifference, it produces an absence which, without positively existing, can nonetheless be encountered. To think of translation in terms of change is to raise the question of what exactly there was in the first place but that no longer is. To think of translation as the mediation of otherness is to ask what it is that causes the other to be not-self – complex enough on the level of the individual and fiendishly difficult when our attention shifts to broader collective and intercultural encounters with otherness.

However broadly or narrowly understood, translation involves bringing together and holding apart things that *are* in various ways: as realities, presences, potentialities and absences. It establishes and traces relationships and influences, similarities and differences. Whether we think of translation as preserving, transforming, instantiating or creating something, ontological presuppositions guide our perception and understanding. But rather than discuss them in isolation, it may be useful to consider key ontological ideas as forming certain configurations, systems or traditions – which is what we will be turning to now.

Major ontological traditions

Substance ontology

[7] This idea becomes particularly complex when taken in the light of ontological positions which do not foreground stability, as discussed above.

As we mentioned above in the brief discussion of Aristotle's *Categories*, substance takes a privileged position as the conceptual fabric of the entire philosophical system. All other categories somehow depend on substances: qualities can only be attributed to them; quantities refer to their size and amount; relations describe how substances stand to one another, and so on. "These various non-substances all owe their existence to substances – each of them, as Aristotle puts it, exists only 'in' a subject" (Cohen and Reeve 2020). A linguistic focus may be useful here. The philosophical term *substance* in English and its cognates in many other modern languages can be traced back to the Greek word *ousia* – one of the most important if notoriously elusive concepts in Aristotle's thought:

> One the one hand, he [Aristotle] uses it [*ousia*] as an abstract noun, speaking of the *ousia* of the thing, and often equating this with what being is for that thing. Here we could perhaps speak either of the "be-ence" of the "be-ity" of the thing. But he also uses it as a concrete noun, naturally taking a plural, and in this use he will claim that men, horses, and trees are all *ousiai*. Here, "be-ity" would seem a little less harsh. For example, the claim that "men are be-ities" could be construed on the model of "men are realities". Indeed, though it lacks the etymological connection with the verb "to be", the word "reality" would serve well as a translation. For it has both the grammatical uses just mentioned, and at the same time, reflects another facet of Aristotle's word: that *ousiai* are the things that really, genuinely, or fundamentally are. (Bostock 1994: 43)

Referring to various, sometime conflicting aspects of being, the Aristotelian *ousia* sought to capture what is real, genuine or fundamental – as opposed to illusory, fake, or accidental.

Indeed, this has been the ambition of the dominant Western accounts of being for thousands of years, influenced by Plato's theory of ideal Forms, discussed earlier. From this perspective, the question, for example, "what makes a table what it is?" cannot be answered with reference to any actual tables or their measurable physical properties. Rather, the substance of a table is to be found in the Forms of which it partakes. The Forms are *transcendent* because they go beyond any material iteration – the ideal form of a table is not the sum or composite of all existing and possible tables but something different altogether. Ways of life may evolve, the language we use may change over time, different people and cultures may think and behave differently from one another. But, from this perspective, the Forms, and thus substances, remain unchanging and transcend these shifts.

It is not difficult to see why these ideas have been at the heart of metaphysical, theological and religious debates. True transcendence and permanence cannot be the convincingly predicated of any parts of the human and material world – they belong exclusively to gods. In the Judeo-Christian theological tradition, the questions of being could not have been any more central: after all, the most sacred name of the Jewish God was YHWH, "I Am that I AM". One of the most pressing philosophical questions in the second and third centuries CE was how to reconcile the belief in one eternal god with the divine sonship of Jesus as a human being. With the increasing dominance of Latin, ontological debates inevitably involved translation between linguistic and conceptual systems. For example, the Greek term *hypostasis* (literally, "that which stands/lies beneath", in earlier philosophical discourse used as largely synonymous with *ousia*), came to correspond to *persona* (originally designating a mask worn by actors in a Roman theatre), and the Greek *ousia* was translated into Latin as *materia*, *substantia*, and *essentia*, thus laying terminological foundations for dominant ontological discourse in a range of European languages. The enormously influential scholastic philosopher Thomas Aquinas, in his exposition of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (Conway 1996: 190–192), declared that "[s]ubstance is that which truly is, while the remaining type of being, namely, accident, depends upon substance for existence"; moreover, there is no "substantial change, but only accidental change in the permanently remaining matter of things". At the same time, since "matter has no form of its own … in dealing with composites of matter and form, to know the substance is sufficient to know the form … of material things. This is equivalent to knowing their *essence* or *quiddity* or *nature* or *whatness*" (ibid.; emphasis added). One can see how the concept of essence as "the universal nature abstracting from singular characteristics" (ibid.) has a strong appeal. It is tempting to think of a competent translation as simply giving a different accidental expression to "the same" substance, initially captured in the original, which itself remains unchanged.

Lawrence Venuti identifies a dominant model of translation that he calls instrumentalism which "conceives of translation as the reproduction or transfer of an invariant that is contained in or caused by the source text, an invariant form, meaning or effect" (2019: 1). The approaches Venuti describes differ in where this invariance is understood to lie but they share the assumption that translation requires the identification of something stable and constant; something that the text "contains". This container metaphor is a key conceptual element of substance-based ontology. Texts are effectively vessels: they contain, carry, convey, and express meanings which remain ontologically independent from them. A similar ontology underlies the familiar distinctions between mind and matter, body and soul, and letter and spirit.

Historically, this position was most fully developed by René Descartes who argued that the body and the soul are made from two radically different substances: corporeal (material) and non-corporeal (immaterial) – a view called substance dualism, or Cartesian dualism – which affect each other but are ontologically distinct. The soul is not a member of the body and therefore has no specific location it in – any attempt to locate it would ignore the fact that these are two different *kinds* of substances – but is nevertheless conjoined with it. In the Christian view, a soul is uniquely connected to a particular body, being created at the same time, but survives its death and exists eternally. In other theological systems, after the death of the body, the immortal soul enters another body (human or non-human) in a cycle of transmigration or rebirth. Whether we call it an essence, soul, spirit, mind, intellect, the true person, or something else still, that immaterial substance or "thing" (*res* in Latin) exists in a separate ontic dimension, so to speak.

One could expect that substance dualism would discourage the idea of a hierarchical order in which the "original" always prevails over a "copy". It could be argued that all textual realities, regardless of their chronological arrangement, are effectively attempts to give some form to the underlying non-textual essence, without ever capturing it fully. In this sense, the source text would not be in any way "more original" than its translations. Yet, this potentially egalitarian perspective has rarely been able to resist the usual power dynamics: over the centuries, some languages were deemed to be inherently more worthy and divinely inspired (think: religious traditions and their sacred scriptures), accurate and precise (think: scientific or scholarly accounts) or elegant and sublime (think: artistic creations) than others.

At the same time, substance ontology invites the dubious notion of fidelity, bolstered by the twin structures of belief and authority. Describing a translation as "faithful" does not attribute to it any verifiable characteristics but simply impresses upon it a seal of approval; it declares its orthodoxy, its satisfactory expression of the "true essence", as established, guarded and proclaimed by an authority sanctioning issues of faith. In fact, authority needs the concept of substance to justify its own existence. Taking the example of the Roman Catholic Church and its doctrine of supernatural transubstantiation of bread and wine into the flesh and body of Christ during the mass, it is hardly incidental that "the same religious organization has claimed to be in exclusive possession of the life-giving substance and have the sole authority to administer it" (Blumczynski 2019: 177). At the heart of transubstantiation is translation *par excellence*: one thing actually becomes another even though its accidental properties remain unaffected. At the same time, "[t]ransubstantiation is the proverbial exception that proves the rule; the rule itself declares that substance, essence, nature, quiddity, or whatness … is

permanent, immutable, and immanent" (ibid.). Except through a divine intervention declared by the highest authority, substance cannot be changed – all we can do is try to give it a different accidental expression.

In the paradigm of thought founded on substance ontology, "translation is largely seen as a process that entails spatial change", which depends on "the possibility of carrying over meaning from one form to the other" (Marais 2019: 122). Whatever it is that is the subject of translation, "meaning is too stable to be changed" or "meaning is too unstable to be determined anyway, which means, in practical terms, that it cannot be changed" (ibid.). Substance ontology, having created this conundrum, does not offer us a way out of it.

Process ontology

As we have seen, the central tenet of classical ontology is that the world is constituted of enduring substances and the experience of change is largely illusory or accidental. Even though this view has been dominant in Western philosophical traditions, it has also been challenged, starting with Heraclitus's insistence that "Everything changes and nothing remains still … and … you cannot step twice into the same stream". Various emphases on what we could call *processuality* can be found in the thought of Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger, James, Peirce, and many others, but possibly the fullest account of process thought is offered by Alfred North Whitehead in his 1929 book *Process and Reality*. The book's subtitle – "An Essay in Cosmology" – signals the extent of its ambition; indeed, Whitehead sought to establish a "systematic descriptive theory of the world" in an attempt to integrate "synthesize, scrutinize and make coherent the divergent intuitions gained through ethical, aesthetic, religious, and scientific experience" (Huswit 2021). With his dual expertise in mathematics and philosophy, Whitehead was uniquely positioned to offer a comprehensive ontological perspective to inform religion, philosophy, and science. Its central premise is that being is inherently dynamic and therefore may only be meaningfully expressed "in terms of energy, activity, and the vibratory differentiations of space-time" (Whitehead 1968: 137– 138). Even though some aspects of our reality may appear temporally stable or reliably recurrent, the world is in fact composed of events and processes. Consequently, being is best explained not as subsistence – which imposes an a-temporal view of reality as if captured in a frozen photographic frame – but rather as becoming, occurring or emerging. "'Existence' (in any of its senses) cannot be abstracted from 'process'. The notions of 'process' and 'existence' presuppose each other" (Whitehead 1968: 96). The fundamental ontological concepts are therefore not *substance*, *essence*, *matter*, *form,*

identity, *quality*, *quiddity* and other familiar notions inherited from the Aristotelian tradition (note that even the adjective *fundamental* used at the beginning of this very sentence suggests something firm, stable, and unshakable – yet another example *pulsation, occasion, succession, potentiality, actuality,* and – above all – *process*.

In Marais's account of process ontology based on Peirce,

> [T]ranslation is not the problem of changing one instance of … meaning into another instance of … meaning, but the very process that drives meaning, the process through which meaning emerges. Translation is the very condition for making and taking meaning. … Meaning is created in one way only, and that is by translating signs into signs. … From a semiotic perspective, translation is not a process that takes a structure (text) as its point of departure and then tries to destructure and restructure that structures into a different structure. Rather, translation is a process that creates relationships between existing meanings, thereby creating new meanings. … Meaning entails change, process, being in the process of being created, but never finally created. (Marais 2019: 122–123)

Moreover, process ontology questions the standard distinction between process and product and challenges the view that "we can distinguish between translation as an activity and translation as the result of the activity of translating" (Bühler 2002: 58). In fact, such distinctions are viewed as mistaken and misleading. "They perpetuate the illusion that there exists an objective, stable, self-sustaining text that 'contains' certain 'content', easily distinguishable from when, how and by whom it is perceived – in short, from its context" (Blumczynski 2016: 68–69). Earlier theoretical accounts tended to view recontextualization in thoroughly substantial terms, simply as "taking a text out of its original frame and context and placing it within a new set of relationships and culturally conditioned expectations" (House 2006: 356). Process ontology, on the other hand, radically problematizes such a view of context, pointing out that

> [W]hat emerges from a translational process is not only a relatively stable product (after all, some words have been chosen over others) but also another process or rather multiple intertwining processes, constantly evolving through further processes of transmission, reception, interpretation, application, and so on, processed by processual beings. (Blumczynski 2021: ??).

If this description of textual entities, mental phenomena and living organisms as processes sounds somewhat unorthodox or confusing, that is likely because we are primed by "the standard interpretation of predicate logic in terms of static individuals with properties that are exemplified timelessly or at a temporal instant", which from the process-philosophical perspective is "an unhelpful theoretical bias" (Seibt 2021).

According to Whitehead (1968: 93), "the discovery of mathematics, like all discoveries, both advanced human understanding, and also produced novel modes of error. Its error was the introduction of the doctrine of form, devoid of "life and motion'". Against this "doctrine of form", Piotr Blumczynski argues that "translation is not a lifeless, motionless, a-temporal form, but a complex, pulsating event" (2016: 70–71), and translations should not be conceptualized as abstract, objective facts, but rather as "experiences of the perceiving subject, spatiotemporal 'occasions'" (ibid.: 82). He suggests that the complex, dynamic relationships between the various entities involved in the translational processes may be best understood as energy flow (ibid.: 83).

In Marais' theorization, the energy flow intuited by Blumczynski takes a more concrete theoretical shape as negentropy. Even though this flow should not be viewed as strictly unidirectional, it is not completely reversible either, any more than cognitive or social processes are: "Once you have understood, seen or heard something, you cannot un-understand, un-see or un-hear it … Once something has been translated, it cannot be untranslated" (Blumczynski 2016: 42); "You can rewrite something, but you cannot unwrite it. … You can retranslate something, but you cannot untranslate it" (Marais 2019: 127). This temporal vector, "the arrow of time" (ibid.) cannot be separated from studying, observing and participating in translational phenomena considered as fundamental semiotic processes occurring within a wide ecology of both the natural and human sciences:

> If one takes into account the basic arguments in fields such as physics, biology, and semiotics, they all seem to indicate that reality is process, and relational process at that. Einstein's relativity theory, Gödel's indeterminacy theory, Schrodinger's uncertainty principle, the realization that DNA translation into protein is the process underlying the metabolism of life and the implications of the Second Law of Thermodynamics for cultural and social systems, all indicate that reality is not stable with some indeterminacy and instability. Rather, reality is process, moving, emergence with some patches of stability, structure, or form. (Marais 2019: 124)

Viewing translation as a "negentropic process" (Marais 2019: 138) allows us to offer a credible account of lived translational experience. Process ontology enables us to account for translation in terms of living: "one has to see meaning-making (i.e., 'the stuff' of translation) as a process akin to metabolism" (Marais 2020: 115). The insistence "that the translational process is somehow alive, that it is characterized by natural pulsation and processual becoming" (Blumczynski 2016: 89) is echoed by the parenthesized prefix in Marais's (bio)semiotic theory of translation (2019). *Bios* – life – flows through the pulsating heart of translation process. Whitehead cautions us that "[a]part from time, there is no meaning for purpose, hope, fear, energy. If there be no historic process, then everything is what it is, namely, a mere fact. Life and motion are lost" (1968: 101–102). This realization has far-reaching epistemological and methodological implications. If "semiosis is a process, like metabolism, that ends with or in death only" (Marais 2020: 125), it cannot be meaningfully studied by methods that effectively freeze it into a-temporal frames. In a similar way that one can only experience music as long as it not paused, translational processes must likewise be studied using processual methods (see Blumczynski 2021).

Flat ontology (onticology)

If process ontology sets us on a path to abandoning a strongly anthropocentric view of reality, Levi Bryant in his book *The Democracy of Objects* offers us another attempt to "think the being of objects unshackled from the gaze of humans in their being for-themselves" (2011: 19). Starting from the position of ontological realism that refuses to treat all objects as human construction, he views the world as composed of beings of only one kind: objects. Some have a human dimension – such as mind, language, and various cultural and social entities – but other objects are independent of humans, and include galaxies, stones, quarks, as well as other living organisms. Taking his cue from Bruno Latour (1993) who critiqued the bifurcation into the separate domains of culture and nature – "the former "treated as the world of freedom, meaning, signs, representations, language, power, and so on" and the later as "being composed on matter governed by mechanistic causality" (23), Bryant leaves behind the nature/culture split and proposes an *onticology* which places the human and the non-human on equal footing. Importantly, Bryant sees translation as a basic world-making process in the sense that "all objects translate one another" by stimulating changes through their interactions – though he also insists that "the objects that are translated are irreducible to their translations" (18) and "translation is not unique to how the mind relates to the world" (26). These translational relations and processes do not proceed by reduction – think of the clichéd image of things "lost

in translation" – or grounding one entity in another but rather by *entanglement*, a term borrowed from the work of Karen Barad, who uses it to describe the relationship that holds between matter and meaning: "Entanglements allow us to maintain the irreducibility, heterogeneity, and autonomy of various types of entities while investigating how they influence one another" (Bryant 2011: 32). To be, therefore, is to be inevitably entangled with other objects.

Bryant criticizes many contemporary philosophers for redefining the original remit of ontology – the study of *being as such* – into the interrogation of human being's access to being, of *being-for-humans*, effectively making it "transcendental anthropology" (35–36), founded on the "unspoken premise of a necessary correlation between being and thought" (37). In an attempt to break away from this correlationist view, he proposes a "post-humanist, realist ontology … where humans are no longer monarchs of being but are instead *among* beings, *entangled* in beings, and *implicated* in other beings" (40; original emphasis). When human perception is not prioritized, open systems, characterised by complex entanglements of objects, are taken as the norm rather than the exception. From this perspective, it makes little sense to attempt to understand open systems by extrapolating from observations of closed systems designed to minimise complexity: "Most things are complex objects, in virtue of which they process an ensemble of tendencies, liabilities and powers. It is by reference to the exercise of their tendencies, liabilities and powers that the phenomena of the world are explained" (Bhaskar 1998: 23). Explanation must be carefully phrased: "we must not say that an object *has* its qualities or that qualities *inhere* in an object, nor above all that objects *are* their qualities, but rather … that qualities are something an object *does*" (Bryant 2011: 69, original emphasis).

This approach has strong parallels in complexity theory (e.g. Marais and Meylaerts 2019a; 2019b). Open systems are complex in the sense of being nonlinear (causes and effects are viewed as reciprocal; minimal changes may have massive effects), emergent (the qualities of a system are the result of the interaction between its components rather than a sum of their individual properties), and defying binary distinctions. Yet while complexity stresses that "analysis should be focused not on parts but on the relationships and connections between parts and between parts and wholes" (Marais and Meylaerts 2019b: 10), onticology insists that "relations cannot ontologically be *internal* to their objects that they relate. In other words, objects are not *constituted* by their relations to the rest of the world" (Bryant 2011: 68; original emphasis). Objects are self-othering – they alienate themselves: while producing differences in the world, they are never identical to their qualities. In Bryant's terms, which bring back some aspects of the central Aristotelian concept, "the substance of an object is perpetually

withdrawn or in excess of any of its manifestations" and "the virtual proper being of an object can only ever be *inferred* from its local manifestations in the world" (2011: 88; original emphasis). In this sense, objects or substances are closed to one another – and yet they can "perturb or irritate one another" (153). An object's being, according to Slavoj Žižek's formulation, is manifested in its paradoxical active-passive presence with which it "moves, annoys, traumatizes us (subjects): at its most radical the object is *that which objects*, that which disturbs the smooth running of things" (2006: 17; original emphasis). But since "objects are withdrawn in the sense that they are never directly perturbed or 'irritated' by other objects", they "always translate perturbations into information according to their own endo-structure, organization, or distinctions" (Bryant 2011: 262). Here translation is viewed not as replication of existing content but as producing something new: "no perturbation ever retains its identity or self-sameness when transported from one entity to another, but rather becomes something different as a consequence of being translated into information and then producing a particular local manifestation in the receiving object" (179).

Why is this ontology flat? Because no object is privileged over others: subject-object or human-world relations are no different in kind from other relations between objects. Humans may have unique powers and capacities but there is no reason why they should be presupposed in every relation even as witnesses or observers:

> Things-in-themselves? But they're fine, thank you very much. And how are you? You complain about things that have not been honored by your vision? You feel that these things are lacking the illumination of your consciousness? But if you missed the galloping freedom of the zebras in the savannah this morning, then so much the worse for you; the zebras will not be sorry that you were not there, and in any case you would have tamed, killed, photographed, or studied them. (Latour 1988: 193)

In the words of Bryant, "flat ontology is not the thesis that all objects contribute equally, but that all objects equally exist. In its ontological egalitarianism, what flat ontology thus refuses is the erasure of any object as the mere construction of another object" (2011: 290). As our planet is moving further into the Anthropocene, this is just the kind of ontology that may be needed.

Concluding thoughts

Our aim in this chapter has been to present an accessible introduction to a range of key ontological concepts and approaches useful in thinking about translation. We hope to have demonstrated the basic point that ontology should matter to translation scholars. Tricky as they are to make explicit and critique, assumptions about the nature of being have significant implications for the kinds of questions we ask, the methods we employ and the research that we do. Rather than criticising previous scholarship for its limited direct engagement with ontology, we hope to have shown that translation scholars have been grappling with being for as long as they have been thinking about translation, even if they have not typically conceptualised their work in those terms. This trend has greatly strengthened over recent decades as the emphasis has moved from established orthodoxies about what translation is towards more speculative approaches which ask instead what it can or might be. To draw on a tired but persistent trope, it is almost as if there has been a stealthy ontological turn. We also hope to have shown that there is scope to turn significantly further. Greater engagement with the long tradition of ontological thought can open new horizons and raise fresh questions. Questions of categories and categorization, sameness and difference, stability and change, and being and non-being all have major implications for translation and can help us to greatly deepen our understanding of it.

If ontology can help us to think about translation, it is equally true that translation can help us to think about ontology. The broad concept of translation upon which this volume is based provides a powerful lens for thinking about being in terms of constant asymmetrical interactions between beings which are fundamentally different from one another, moving both translation and ontology from the rarefied and abstract to the practical and everyday. Nowhere are the tensions between stability and change which characterise thinking about ontology brought into view more clearly than with translation in both its lingual and non-lingual variants. From this perspective, translation moves from being a peripheral limit case to a model for approaching the most basic and universal of questions. We have begun to see the power of translation in this regard in its status as a central term in the work of Latour, Lotman and Bryant. As Marais' work shows, translation scholars also have contributions to make.

Translation and ontology, then, are linked on a fundamental and highly abstract level. As a final concluding remark, we wish to emphasise that they are also connected on the level of practice. As with anything, interlingual translation is a primary means for engaging with ontological thought beyond the tradition of our own language. Nietzsche and Heidegger wrote in German, Latour and Sartre in French, Plato and Aristotle in Greek – all have hugely influenced anglophone thinking and, without translation, would have remained inaccessible to

most readers. Yet even works by major thinkers writing in dominant European languages, for instance Peter Sloterdijk and Jean-Luc Nancy, remain untranslated. The problem is far worse with less central languages, as seen, for example, in the limited available translations of Roman Ingarden's work in Polish and Mikhail Bakhtin's in Russian. From beyond Europe there is even less. We have argued that translation studies needs robust, careful, and sustained ontological reflection. But the reverse seems just as true: our understanding of being, in order to further to enlarge and develop, must continue to be stirred, irritated, and transformed by translation.

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