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Political Ontology and Ontological Relativity: Pro Variantology—A Footnote

Georg Cantor, the founder of set theory, defined a set as a collection of well-differentiated objects of our thought into a whole. Today, mathematics defines the formation of a set such that all things which have the feature F can be summarised to a new thing, and that this new thing contains all things with the feature F: {x: F (x)}. There is a thing x, a set, which contains all the things with the feature F.

Instead of features F, we can also say predicate E; for example, the predicate "red". The set of red things contains all things with the feature or predicate "red". Therefore, sets are extensions of predicates. Sets are no propositions on being. They do not say something exists, even if it sounds like that. Sets say, if things have the feature "red" we can define a set which contains all the things which are "red". Hence we can define a general principle of set formation: for each feature E there is a set x, which is the predicate extension of E. The unlimited formation of sets as absolute predicate extensions created the famous antinomies of Cesare Burali-Forti, Georg Cantor and Bertrand Russell, like the set of all sets which do not contain themselves as elements.

Recently, set theory has been rediscovered by philosophers for redefining the relation between words and things, language and being. In *The Coming Community* Giorgio Agamben argues against the separation of language and being. He sees the misery of our time in the alienation of the linguistic being and argues for a *circulus creativus* between thing and language: "the idea of a thing is the thing itself; the name insofar as it names a thing is nothing but the thing insofar as it is named by the name".[1] The problem is not that the word "shoe" in its acoustic or graphic form does not look like the thing "shoe". Even if we can completely distinguish the shoe from the term "shoe", the true problem is its "being-in-language". "Being-in-language is the non-predicative property par excellence that belongs to each member of a class and at the same time makes its belonging an aporia."[2] The classical problem of set theory, how non-predicative

1 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* [1990] (Minnesota, 1993), p. 73.

2 Agamben, *Coming Community*, p. 73.

properties can become elements of predicate extension, is reformulated: How can non-linguistic elements (being) become elements of language? Agamben's strange answer is: "Being-in-language". Being-in-language combines being and language and erases the difference. Agamben sketches an ontology as a paradise unspoiled by the *experimentum linguae*, like Cantor's paradise of set theory without paradoxes. This is clearly a theological ontology without the evil of language.

Another philosopher who used set theory as the formal framework for his ontology is Alain Badiou. Like Agamben, Badiou creates a similar *circulus creativus* when he says: mathematics is nothing other than "being thinking itself".[3] The being thinks according to Badiou and not the brain of the subject. In his book *L'Etre et l'événement*, he uses mathematics and identifies it as ontology: "Everything is a set."[4]

For philosophers the attraction of set theory to legitimate an ontological philosophy is precisely the method of predicative extension: For each feature E there is a set x which is the predicate extension of E. It is seductive to think there exists something that has a certain feature, because if there is a certain feature then this feature already exists, and to find a thing which has this feature is just a confirmation of second order. If there exists one thing which is red, then "red" already exists as a presumption. We only have to look for things that are red. So the name defines the thing and the thing exists already through the name. The problem is only the *nomen innominabile*, because the innominable exists only as name, because by its very nature it cannot be "being-in-language", being innominable, having no name. Like Russell's set of all sets which do not contain themselves as elements, that which has no name, being-no-name, cannot be in the state of "being-in-language", and therefore does not exist ("being-not-in-language") and so the thing exists only as it is named. But the idea to define existence as a predicate extension is already a linguistic concept and to transfer it to ontology is precisely that linguistic method from which Agamben and Badiou will save the world. Founding ontology on set theory, that is, to define being as predicate extension, is already the consequence of an *experimentum linguae* that Agamben defies. Agamben and Badiou try to break out of the prison of language, of the authority of language, by turning "being-in-language" into "being itself". Only on this ground can they say: "Everything is a set." Finally, this is an echo of Parmenides: being is language.

3 Alain Badiou, *A Subject of Truth* (Minnesota, 2003), p. 220.

4 Alain Badiou, *L'Etre et l'événement* (Paris, 1988), p. 55.

However, if these philosophers had followed the development of set theory up to Willard van Orman Quine's *Set Theory and Its Logic* and its famous "New Foundation", they could have avoided this equation between ontology and mathematics.[5] To avoid the classical paradoxes of set theory, Russell developed set theory as a theory of types as variables. These variables serve as comprehension of sets. Quine has stratified the consecutively ordered types of Russell. Therefore the Quine system has the advantage that to each set M there exists also the compliment non-M as set. The features, which serve the comprehension of sets, are stratified and therefore become variables. Thus in 1968 Quine introduced the concept of ontological relativity. Indebted to John Dewey, language is not the mirror of being for Quine: "Language is a social art."[6] He argues against ontology precisely because of the circularity I have demonstrated: "What makes ontological questions meaningless when taken absolutely is not universality but circularity. A question of the further term: 'What is an F?' can be answered only by recourse to a further term: 'An F is a G.'" "What is an F?" is not a sentence about existence, it is a question about the relation of F to G. Set theory is not a confirmation of what there is—of ontology, it is a universe of variables of quantification over a certain range, assigning objects from the universe to names and choosing subsets of this universe as extensions of predicates. When P is a predicate of a subset, it can become a new predicate in another subset if we interpret P as true of the correlates f(x) of the old objects x that P was true of. Quine's *Ontological Relativity* does not assert set theory as a possible foundation of ontology, just the opposite. Quine shows, with the help of a modern set theory, that ontology is theoretically insufficient and meaningless. He argues against ontology, and lays the foundation for variantology. He describes the universe as values of variables: "To be is to be the value of a (bound) variable." Variantology instead of ontology should serve as foundation for a future political philosophy.

5 Willard van Orman Quine, *Set Theory and Its Logic* (Cambridge, MA, 1963).

6 W. v. O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity, and Other Essays* (New York, 1969), p. 26.