



Continental Philosophy

Gabriel's Metaphysics of Sense

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Markus Gabriel. 2015. *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

The subtitle of Markus Gabriel's *Fields of Sense* promises "A New Realist Ontology." It is therefore surprising, to say the least, to find the book committed to the thesis that "the world does not exist." Moreover, realism aside, the thesis sounds absurd on its face. And yet, the denial of the existence of the world, standing as it does at the center of Markus Gabriel's book, is not as crazy as it sounds (or not quite, anyway). The thesis is playfully provocative and trades on two different concepts of *world*—one ordinary, the other technical. In the ordinary sense, in which "world" just means *things*, the thesis is of course false. Things do exist.

That, however, is not what Gabriel means by "world." What he has mind, and the existence of which he denies, is not *things*, but rather any complete, all-encompassing totality of things falling under a single, comprehensive *description*, much as the metaphysical tradition has sometimes understood the totality of entities comprehended in a rationally coherent system of ideas, or in its Christian iteration, the whole of Creation perfectly and completely grasped by God's omniscience. Gabriel's denial of the existence of "the world" in this technical sense is thus a denial of the intelligibility of the idea of a single, complete, comprehensive description of everything.

It is easy to agree with Gabriel that *that* notion is incoherent. To begin with, it is not clear that there is any intelligible criterion of completeness for descriptions in general. Perhaps, as Wittgenstein said of languages, a description can no more be "complete" than, say, a city. Moreover, as Gabriel himself observes, the very idea of a complete description of anything seems to be ruled out by the fact that a description of anything constitutes a further fact about that thing, whose complete description would then in turn require a further description, and so on ad infinitum (cf. *FS* 17–18 and chap. 7).

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This fairly innocuous construal of Gabriel's no-world thesis, however, presupposes a commonsense distinction that his own ontological "fields of sense" theory denies, namely, the distinction between things and descriptions of them. Gabriel insists on a strict distinction between ontology and metaphysics, and since his own ontological theory denies the intelligibility of the very idea of a single, comprehensively describable world, it is in that respect resolutely anti-metaphysical. Other critics of traditional metaphysics—notably Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the later Wittgenstein—have likewise based their critiques on a repudiation of that aspiration to complete description. The force of their arguments, however, generally derived (though in different ways) from a recognition of the heterogeneity of descriptions and things described. For them, completely describing the world is no more possible in principle than, say, seeing everything at once or completely inhabiting an environment. Gabriel, by contrast, insists that descriptions are embedded in the world in a way that makes impossible any fundamental distinction between them and their objects. For Gabriel, that is, the world itself is nothing other than the contents of all the true descriptions of it: "objects are individuated by descriptions that objectively hold good of them" (*FS* 13).

In this paper I shall argue that Gabriel's rejection of the distinction between descriptions and objects has two troubling consequences. The first is that it renders his denial of the world's existence less innocuous than I have so far made it sound. For although by "world" Gabriel often means, as I said above, *things as falling under a complete description of everything*, he also sometimes means simply *things as they may be*—or better, to set aside matters of individuation, *stuff as it may be— independently of any description*. So, it turns out, Gabriel's denial of the existence of the world is indeed a denial of the existence of any such things, or any such stuff. He concedes, of course, that some things exist independently of some descriptions, but he insists that nothing exists independently of any description at all, in particular the true descriptions—or "truths" or "facts" (Gabriel uses all three terms interchangeably)—that pertain to or hold of it. This, it seems to me, casts serious doubt on the term "realism" as a characterization of his ontology. Indeed, as Gabriel himself acknowledges, the realism that emerges from his theory of existence as "appearing in a field of sense" (*FS* 166) closely resembles Hegelian absolute idealism. This is just a matter of terminology, of course, but it is a telling one—about which more later.

The second consequence of Gabriel's conflation of entities and descriptions is very different and, I believe, more problematic. For by conflating true descriptions with facts—"By 'fact' I refer to anything that is true of something" (*FS* 45)—and facts with entities, Gabriel removes his argument so far from any ordinary sense of the word "description" that his conclusion that "objects are individuated by descriptions" evidently amounts to no more than the thesis that facts are metaphysically fundamental. That is not a trivial thesis, but it is a metaphysical thesis. Worse, we shall see that it renders unintelligible the two substantive concepts central to his ontology of "fields of sense," namely *field* and *sense*.

I shall conclude by suggesting that Gabriel's ontology embodies and perpetuates a philosophical inclination that Heidegger identified as the hallmark of metaphysical thinking, namely the "forgetting of being" (*Seinsvergessenheit*). A comparison is, of course, not an argument. Maybe we ought to forget being. My brief excursus on Heidegger will merely be an attempt to place Gabriel's project in what I take to be its proper historical and methodological context.

I

The cornerstone of Gabriel's ontology is a commitment to what many, myself included, regard as an outmoded dogma of early analytical philosophy, beginning with but not limited to Fregean semantics, namely *descriptivism* (*FS* 12–13, 230, *et passim*). Descriptivism, simply put, is the thesis that reference—whether linguistic, mental, or otherwise representational—is never primitive or direct, but always determined or mediated by descriptive content.

Gabriel's descriptivism, however, is peculiar in being unrestricted to linguistic meaning or even mental content. It is instead, as he puts it, "ontological," which is to say, it generalizes Frege's concept of sense (*Sinn*) to a wide range of phenomena, for example vision: "I suggest that we generally think of sensation and accordingly of perception as having the form of descriptions" (*FS* 20). Nor is it limited to human experience, for Gabriel also refers to "perceptual descriptions involved in being a fly" (*FS* 19). Even this understates the extremity of his generalization of Fregean *Sinn*, however: Gabriel not only maintains that senses inhabit nonhuman intentional (and nonintentional) attitudes, but that they are somehow constitutive of everything that can be said *to be* at all—and not just everything that can literally be *said* to be, but everything that in fact *is*. According to "ontological descriptivism," objects are individuated by true descriptions, true descriptions being equivalent to facts, that is, "descriptions that objectively hold good of them regardless of whether anyone is apprehending the facts about the objects. Loosely speaking, senses are part of the furniture of reality" (*FS* 13).

Gabriel's conception of senses as fully objective and mind-independent seems to accord with Frege's anti-psychologism and platonism in semantics and mathematics. Unfortunately, it also obliterates the distinctions Frege drew between sense and reference (*Bedeutung*), and between concept and object (*FS* 13, 346–7). Gabriel concedes that his ontological appropriation of Fregean descriptivism is "contentious," since, in stark contrast to Frege's conception of senses as "modes of presentation" or "ways of being given" (*Arten des Gegebenseins*), Gabriel maintains that

senses are properties of objects and not ways of looking at them. In my reading, even in Frege the theory of sense is located primarily in ontology and belongs to a reconstruction of the meaning of existence. It is only derivatively part of a theory of knowledge- or information-acquisition. (*FS* 12)

Gabriel is willing to collapse Frege's cardinal distinctions between sense and reference, and concept and object, because his desire to subvert all traditional dualisms of subject and object, mind and world, and so on, leads him to conflate true descriptions with facts, and facts with entities generally, or what is (the case): "a *fact* is a constellation of objects held together by a description that holds good of the objects. . . . Facts are truths articulated by descriptions involving objects" (*FS* 18–19). Facts are "truths, that is to say, objective mind- and representation-independent descriptions of objects" (*FS* 20). Perhaps most strangely, Gabriel writes, "A true thought immediately is a fact; it is a property of its objects" (*FS* 20).

Gabriel's "new realist ontology" thus consists in the claim that what it means for entities *to be* is for them to be constituted by facts, which is to say truths, which is to say descriptive contents (contentiously) conceived on the model of Fregean senses—but *ontologized*, that is, generalized beyond the semantic, cognitive, and epistemological contexts in which Frege's theory is usually understood.

Precisely because it departs so drastically from both ordinary understanding and philosophic tradition, Gabriel's concept of *sense* obviously stands in need of some interpretation to distinguish it from the various concepts he brings together under its banner, namely *description*, *truth*, *fact*, and *object*. To specify his intended use of the word "sense," Gabriel maintains that there are in addition what he calls "fields of sense" (*Sinnfelder*) comprising or containing the facts constitutive of entities in general. A "field" is presumably something like a *horizon* or *world*, but here again those notions turn out to shed little light on Gabriel's concept. It is crucial that the phrase "fields of sense" have some distinct meaning, since it is precisely the *relation* between entities and the fields in which they "appear" that constitutes the *existence* of those entities on Gabriel's view: "*Existence is appearing in a field of sense*. To exist is to objectively appear in a field of sense, where the relation of appearing is in no way generally restricted by any local human-all-too-human conditions of grasping it" (*FS* 166).

This is the thesis of Gabriel's book, so it is important that the notions of *field* and *appearing in a field* be as clearly specified as possible. To say that "appearing in a field" is not specific to the conditions of any human experience or understanding is to say what it is *not*. But what *is* it? Gabriel writes, "Appearing is fairly human. What appears comes forth; it stands apart from a certain background. This is what both the etymology of 'appearance' and 'existence' suggest" (*FS* 166). And further,

If anything exists whatsoever, if there is something rather than nothing, there is a plurality of fields of sense. If there is even one single object, in order for the object to exist it has to appear in a field of sense, stand forth from some background or other, and that means that there has to be a background, the field. (*FS* 167)

A field of sense is thus a kind of background, consisting of some maximally general species of descriptive content, against or out of which entities emerge or "appear." The crucial relation, then, the relation constituting the very existence of anything, according to Gabriel, is the relation of figure to ground.

The figure-ground schema is familiar from Gestalt psychology and Husserlian phenomenology, but its application to ontology is above all reminiscent of Heidegger's conception of being as a kind of "clearing" (*Lichtung*), a region or open space of unconcealment in which things can manifest themselves for those entities defined by their privileged status within the clearing, namely those *for whom* the clearing *is* a clearing, and *to whom* things show up as the things they are. That privileged entity is *us*, or as Heidegger says, *Dasein*.

On closer inspection, however, Gabriel's theory turns out to have nothing in common with Heidegger's conception of being, for Gabriel has divorced his concept of field from any accompanying notion of the entity *for whom* fields of meaning or significance stand open as fields, and *to whom* things are therefore able to occur or appear in them as what they are. It is not just that Gabriel resists assimilating his concepts of sense and field to arguably dubious theoretical notions like mind, subjectivity, perspective, consciousness, linguistic meaning, or representation. Rather, he wants his concept of *Sinnfelder* to function autonomously, without any support from otherwise intuitively available notions of experience, thought, understanding, or person—that is, the ordinary phenomena in terms of which we can even begin to make sense of concepts such as description, sense, truth, fact, and field. Gabriel simply helps himself to those latter terms as if their meaning were

already clear and their roles in his theory sufficiently defined in the absence of any empirical or phenomenological context of interpretation.

The obscurity deepens when Gabriel further assimilates fields of sense themselves to the entities whose existence consists in their appearing in them. What *is* a field of sense? Nothing essentially different from anything else whose existence Gabriel takes himself to have defined precisely as appearance within a field of sense. Continuing from the passage quoted above, he writes,

for the field to exist in its own right it has to appear in another field. Fields cannot be the type of thing that can contain objects without being contained themselves, as they have to exist in order to contain anything. But if "existence" means "being contained" (in the sense of "appearing in a field of sense"), there has to be some field or other for any given field in which it appears. (*FS* 167)

At this point, Gabriel's theory begins to seem both vacuous and incoherent. It is vacuous because, as far as I can tell, the concept of field has no definite content. What is a field of sense? A kind of horizon or background of meaning, but crucially unlike any actual horizon or background ordinarily so called (perceptual, experiential, cultural, historical), or for that matter any actual variety of meaning normally acknowledged as such (linguistic, behavioral, perceptual, affective). The only defining characteristic of fields of sense that I can discern in Gabriel's account is that they do what he says they do, namely individuate entities and define what it is for them to be. To say that they do this by providing contexts in which entities "appear" within in them is an empty rhetorical gesture, since Gabriel's concept of "appearing" has no apparent connection to anything that normally goes by that name (visibility, perceptibility, presence to consciousness or thought, and so on). Instead, "appearing" in a field of sense seems to mean nothing more or less than what Gabriel wants it to explain, namely *existing*.

The theory also involves a vicious regress. To exist is to appear in a field of sense. Unlike Heidegger's notion of being as a kind of horizon or background, however, fields in Gabriel's ontology are themselves entities, that is, they exist. What is it for them to exist? The same as what it is for anything to exist, namely to appear in a field of sense, which must in turn exist in a further field of its own, and so on. So, Gabriel says, "The number of fields of sense is accordingly indefinite" (*FS* 221). The problem with this is not that Gabriel has posited an infinite number of fields, since of course that would amount to the kind of totalizing metaphysical assertion his theory abhors. The problem is rather that the regress that leads him to say that the number of fields is "indefinite" makes it hard to see what it meant to say that things exist by "appearing" in fields of sense in the first place, just as it is hard to see what it could mean to say that the world is "supported" by a giant turtle, if the entire chain of support turns out to be (as the apocryphal Hindu sage is supposed to have insisted) "turtles all the way down."

II

Notwithstanding these problems concerning the content and coherence of Gabriel's ontology, however, it seems to me that the underlying intention and inspiration for his project emerges fairly clearly, though indirectly, from the figures and traditions he claims as allies and precursors. As I said earlier, one such close relative of Gabriel's view is Hegel's absolute idealism, for if one construes the descriptive content of sense as (something like) the

fully objective content of “thought”—in Plato’s or Frege’s sense of that word, rather than (say) Hume’s or Nietzsche’s—then Gabriel’s “new realism” appears to be a version of the rationalist identification of reality with thought.

An even more telling clue is Gabriel’s approving reference to Bertrand Russell’s notion that “Existence is essentially a property of a propositional function” (Russell 2010: 66), so that, as Russell puts it, “it is meaningless to say ‘*A* exists’ unless ‘*A*’ is (or stands for) a phrase of the form ‘the so-and-so.’ If the so-and-so exists, and *x* is the so-and-so, to say ‘*x* exists’ is nonsense” (Russell 2010: 132; cf. *FS* 46). From the fact that “exists” is not a legitimate predicate, that is, Russell infers that existence as such cannot itself be a proper subject of thought or discourse:

As regards the actual things there are in the world, there is nothing at all you can say about them that in any way corresponds to this notion of existence. It is a sheer mistake to say that there is anything analogous to existence that you can say about them. . . . There is no sort of point in a predicate which could not conceivably be false. I mean, it is perfectly clear that, if there were such a thing as this existence of individuals that we talk of, it would be absolutely impossible for it not to apply, and that is the characteristic of a mistake. (Russell 2010: 77; cf. *FS* 67, n6)

Far from grappling with anything metaphysically deep, “The ontological argument and most of its refutations are found to depend upon bad grammar” (Russell 2010: 132).

Gabriel’s appeal to Russell’s denial that existence is any kind of property at all might seem surprising, since his own position is that existence *is* a property, just not what he calls a “proper property,” nor for that matter “a metaphysical, nor a logical property in the traditional sense” (*FS* 43–4); rather, it is “the *ontological property par excellence*” (*FS* 44). The difference, however, as far as I can tell, is merely terminological, for the “ontological property” Gabriel has in mind is, as we have seen, the property of “appearing” in a field of sense, which just means something like figuring somehow (how?) in a constellation of facts or truths, whose “descriptive contents” are close kin to what Russell—*unlike* Frege—called “propositions.” So, although Gabriel is right to say that his conception of the property of existence differs from the notion of “a logical property in the traditional sense,” what it shares with that notion is the idea that what we understand when we understand that something *is* can be analyzed in terms of the (broadly speaking) “logical” structure internal to a thought or proposition (or “fact”).

This idea, unlike the specific argument for the existence of fields of sense, is neither empty nor incoherent. On the contrary, it is *profound*—if only in being, as it seems to me, *profoundly wrong* as an account of our understanding of being. I cannot *show* it to be wrong. Profound ideas, right or wrong, are by definition irrefutable. Suffice it to say that I think Russell cannot be right to insist that “*x* exists” is simply meaningless. He is right, of course, that we don’t know what it means, *if* we don’t know what “*x*” refers to. Russell is also surely right that existence is not a predicate indicating a real (or what Gabriel calls a “proper”) property. Still, “exists” is not just an empty placeholder. It means something, and we know (roughly) what it means. The statement “Something exists,” although vague, seems to me not only meaningful, but self-evidently true. Indeed, as Ernst Tugendhat once observed, if “*x* exists” is meaningless, then so is the existential quantifier “ \exists ,” whose meaning logicians simply take for granted (as of course they must). What this suggests, contrary to the deflationary aim that Russell and Gabriel share, is that *existence*—like *truth*, *beauty*,

right, and *good*—is a primitive notion for which there simply is not and cannot be any further analysis. If that is so, then there is something perverse in the very idea of advancing a theory of existence.

Such, I believe, was Heidegger's view. From a Heideggerian point of view, that is, Gabriel's account of existence as a function of the descriptive contents of sense, like Russell's reduction of existence to the logical form of propositional functions, is symptomatic of the forgetting of being characteristic of metaphysics. Metaphysics, according to Heidegger, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, rests on a sharp distinction between *what-being* (*Was-sein*) and *that-being* (*Daß-sein*), *essentia* and *existentia* (Heidegger 2003: 2–3; translation modified). That distinction, moreover, perpetuates a fascination with the former at the expense of the latter, and so a privileging of entities (*das Seiende*) over being (*das Sein*). The predominance of *what-being*, Heidegger says,

encourages a peculiar privileging of entities. *That-being*, in which nothing seems to be said about entities themselves (about their *what*), suffices to establish that entities are, so that the “are” and the being thought in it are simply taken for granted. (Heidegger 2003: 11; translation modified)

The crucial point here, and what I believe gets at the heart of Gabriel's project, is Heidegger's remark that in mere *that-being* or *existentia* as such, “nothing seems to be said about entities themselves.” Why not? Because, for metaphysical thinking, the only aspect of entities subject to discourse, representation, or thought at all is precisely their *what*, not their *that*. The *that* of entities, their sheer existence, as Russell maintained, is nothing that can be expressed by a predicate, but is instead a purely formal artifact of the logical function of the *what* contents that constitute entities by capturing them in an idea, a thought, a “description.”

Like Russell's reduction of existence to propositional function, Gabriel's ontology is in effect a theory of *that-being* that purports to reduce it to the *what-being* articulated in the descriptive content of what he calls “sense.” It is a denial—or, Heidegger would say, a symptomatic forgetting—of that which remains both distinct from and irreducible to the *what* content of propositional thought, namely the primitive (nonpropositionally structured) “fact” *that* anything *is*. If the notion of “*appearing* in a field of sense” is to shed further light on that primitive (non-)“fact” of the sheer *existence* of anything, then more needs to be said about the phenomenon of *appearing* itself. And what that in turn requires is not pseudo-Fregean metaphysical speculation of the sort Gabriel offers in this book, but a concrete phenomenology of the manifestation of entities in our actual experience and understanding.

References

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