Abstract

The focus of this essay is the idea of the univocity of being, championed by Duns Scotus and given prominence more recently by Gilles Deleuze. Although one concern of the essay is with how this idea can be established, its primary concern is with something more basic: how the idea can even be properly thought. This issue is explored with the aid of some ideas about logical syntax borrowed from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. One incidental benefit of the exercise is to indicate how there can be dialogue between analytic philosophers and those of other traditions.

Keywords

analytic philosophers, being, Deleuze, Duns Scotus, logical syntax, Tractatus, univocity, Wittgenstein

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Being, Univocity, and Logical Syntax

**1. The univocity of being**

There are three strikingly different groups of philosophers with whom a title such as this, a title in which mention of being or existence is conjoined with mention of the broadly semantic or the broadly grammatical, is liable to resonate especially loudly: analytic metaphysicians; historians of medieval philosophy; and students of post-structuralism, or more specifically students of the work of Deleuze. I shall say a little in connection with all three. But I shall say most in connection with the first and third, whose concerns I hope to illuminate by discussing them in tandem with one another.

Prima facie their concerns are quite different. Analytic metaphysicians have long been exercised by questions about what exists. Do mathematical entities exist, for example?—and if not, how come there are infinitely many primes? Do *holes* exist?—or is it just that, among the physical things that exist, some are perforated or porous or some such? The more analytic metaphysicians have grappled with these questions, the more self-conscious they have become about what they are up to. There is accordingly a thriving branch of analytic metaphysics, sometimes referred to as metametaphysics, whose aim is to clarify what is at stake in addressing such questions. How far is it a matter of ascertaining the human-independent constitution of reality and how far a matter of settling on a way of speaking, perhaps even settling on an interpretation of the verb ‘exist’?[[1]](#footnote-1) The concerns within analytic metaphysics of this self-conscious kind are primarily semantic, epistemological, or methodological.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Not so Deleuze’s concerns. Deleuze resurrects a medieval debate that arises even given an inventory of all the things that exist. Suppose we have such an inventory, never mind for the time being what might have been required to compile it. There is a question, on which the medieval debate turns, about the nature of the things in this inventory. One way to put the question is as follows: are any of these things so different in kind from ordinary things such as apples and snakes that our very talk of the ‘being’ of the former has to be understood differently from our talk of the ‘being’ of the latter? This is really a debate about transcendence. Another way to put the question is this: do any of these things enjoy an absolute transcendence?

The concerns that motivate this question are more characteristic of mainstream traditional ontology than those that motivate the analytic metaphysicians’ questions about how to determine what exists. They have their source in Aristotle, who recognized different senses of being corresponding to his different categories (Aristotle ([1941a](#B6)), Ch. 4, and ([1941b](#B7)), Bk. I, Ch. 2, 185a20 ff.). And the tools that the medievals used in pursuing their debate were largely Aristotelian tools. But they had a very particular focus which gave their debate its distinctively medieval stamp. They were interested in the nature of God. Their debate was about whether God’s transcendence, relative to His creation, was so radical that no language, or at least no language of a certain basic kind that includes the language of being, could be used with the same meaning with respect to both; and, if that were the case, whether it followed that any use of such language with respect to both must always involve brute equivocation or whether there was room for a more nuanced position whereby the literal use of such language with respect to God’s creatures could be extended to an analogical use of such language with respect to God Himself. Deleuze’s interest is a variant of this. He is interested in what it takes to make sense of everything as part of one and the same purely immanent reality—a reality that is free of any such absolute transcendence.

Of course, there is no sharp division between Deleuze’s quest and the analytic metaphysicians’ quest. It is all very well my urging us to prescind temporarily from what would be required to compile an inventory of all the things that exist. But if this inventory had to include things that were absolutely transcendent, then there would be an issue about what it would mean even to say that such things ‘exist’, and that issue would lie squarely in the analytic metaphysicians’ territory. Even so, prima facie at least, there are two broadly different sets of concerns here.

What animates Deleuze’s concerns? All manner of things. But he has two projects in particular that deserve special mention. One of these is to extend Heidegger’s work on being. Heidegger drew a distinction between being and the entities that have it.[[3]](#footnote-3) The entities that have it are all the things that we can be given or all the things of which we can make sense; their being is their very giveability or intelligibility (Heidegger ([1962a](#B145)), §2 and p. 228).[[4]](#footnote-4) By drawing this distinction Heidegger enabled being itself to become a distinct focus of attention, a privilege which he argued traditional metaphysics had prevented it from enjoying. Not only that; he also contributed a great deal to our understanding of being. Deleuze wants to enlarge that understanding. He thinks that Heidegger has helped us towards a unified account of being. In particular, he thinks that Heidegger has helped us towards an account of being which, though it certainly acknowledges the many profound differences between entities, and indeed the many profound differences between their ways of being, does not cast any of them in the rôle of the absolutely transcendent and does not involve any Aristotelian polysemy. (Heidegger himself emphasized the magnitude of this task. At one point he put the pivotal question as follows: ‘Can there . . . be found any single unifying concept of being in general that would justify calling these different ways of being ways of *being*?’ (Heidegger ([1982](#B147)), p. 176, emphasis in original).[[5]](#footnote-5)) Nevertheless Deleuze thinks that Heidegger’s investigations are importantly incomplete. It is not enough, in Deleuze’s view, for an account of being to accommodate all these differences; it is not even enough for it to expose and articulate them all. If we are properly to understand what it is for everything to be immanent, then we must also understand how these differences themselves contribute to the fundamental character of being. We must acknowledge a kind of ontological priority that these differences enjoy over the entities between which they obtain, the entities whose being is under investigation, the things of which we can make sense. For this, Deleuze thinks, we need to look beyond Heidegger.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The second project is somewhat more nebulous but no less significant. Appeals to absolute transcendence can be used to evade all sorts of problems, both theoretical and practical. Thus many people turn to their belief in God to help them acquiesce in suffering, and many of these in turn appeal to God’s absolute transcendence to help them address the question of how suffering can be part of God’s plan. Their answer is that we cannot really understand how, since all talk of God, including talk of God’s plan, is at most an analogical extension of talk that we *can* really understand. In Deleuze’s view, such appeals to absolute transcendence come too easily. Alluding to the famous Dostoevskian adage, he writes, ‘One must not say, “If God does not exist, everything is permitted.” It is just the opposite . . . It is with God that everything is permitted’ (2005, p. 10).[[7]](#footnote-7) Learning how to live without recourse to absolute transcendence is in large part an ethical exercise for Deleuze. It means learning how to confront all that we are given in such a way as to make sense of it in its own terms, resisting the seductions of, as it may be, an inscrutable theodicy or an abstract teleology in whose transcendent terms all our afflictions are ultimately justified. It is a non-escapist life-affirming exercise. And the kernel of the second project is to think it through at an ontological level.

In the medieval debate Duns Scotus repudiated absolute transcendence. He did not deny that *some* of our basic talk about God has to be interpreted non-literally.[[8]](#footnote-8) But he did deny that it all does. That, for Duns Scotus as for Deleuze, allows such talk too much free rein. It makes it merely formulaic and means that we cannot have any real grasp of what we are talking about when we indulge in it.[[9]](#footnote-9) In particular, this must apply to our very talk of God’s being. Duns Scotus accordingly championed ‘the univocity of being’ (Duns Scotus ([1987](#B102)), pp. 19–20).[[10]](#footnote-10) Deleuze seeks to do likewise.

He considers two broad approaches to this problem, one that he finds in Spinoza and one that he finds in Nietzsche. The first approach involves viewing being as an entity in its own right. Any mention of the being of any other entity is to be understood as a reference to this entity. I say any mention of the being of any ‘other’ entity. In fact, of course, any mention of the being of being itself had better be included. Thus in Spinoza, whose version of this approach Deleuze treats as more or less canonical, the rôle of being is assigned to an infinite substance in which everything that is, is; and that includes this very substance, which is in itself (Spinoza ([2002](#B316)), Pt I, Def. 3, Ax. 1, and Prop. 15).[[11]](#footnote-11) Spinoza works hard, on Deleuze’s interpretation, to keep all intimations of the absolute transcendence of this substance at bay. He needs to work hard. The way in which he executes his project means that this substance is radically different in kind from any other entity. Its infinitude, if not its transcendence, is absolute (Spinoza ([2002](#B316)), Pt. I, Def. 6)—which means, among other things, that its infinitude is unique to it (Spinoza ([2002](#B316)), Pt. I, Props 14 and 15). But Spinoza achieves his goal, at least on Deleuze’s interpretation, by not only allowing his substance to express itself through its attributes (notably through thought and extension, the two of its attributes of which we are aware), but by allowing it to do so in just the same sense as any other entity—that is, in just the same sense as any of its modes—each of which likewise expresses the essence of this substance through one of the substance’s attributes (Spinoza ([2002](#B316)), Pt. I, Defs. 3, 4, and 5, and Pt. II, Def. 1). Spinoza is not only able to say that his substance is extended, for example. He is able to say that it is extended in just the same sense in which Mount Everest is extended.[[12]](#footnote-12) There is no hint of absolute transcendence here.

It is a further question, however, whether there is complete univocity of being, as Deleuze claims. The doctrine that any mention of the being of a thing is to be understood as a reference to one particular entity is already to be found in Aristotle. ‘All that “is”,’ Aristotle writes, ‘is related to one central point’ (Aristotle ([1941c](#B8)), Bk. IV, Ch. 2, 1003a32–33) and he goes on to insist that any mention of the being of a thing is to be understood as a reference to this ‘point’ (Aristotle ([1941c](#B8)), Bk. IV, Ch. 2, 1003b6–7). Yet for Aristotle, this doctrine, so far from showing that there is a single sense of being, precisely corroborates his view that there are different senses of being. He likens it to the doctrine that any mention of the healthiness of a thing is to be understood as a reference to health, where *that*, he urges, betokens different senses of healthiness: a healthy diet is a diet that is conducive to health, a healthy complexion a complexion that is symptomatic of health, a healthy person a person who enjoys health, and so on. The common reference to health in each of these cases shows only that the differences of sense are not brute ambiguities. They remain differences for all that. In a distinction that Aristotle draws, the term ‘healthy’ applies in all these cases not ‘*kath’ hen*’, in virtue of one thing, but ‘*pros hen*’, with reference to one thing. Similarly, on Aristotle’s view, in the case of the term ‘being’ (Aristotle ([1941c](#B8)), Bk. IV, Ch. 2, 1003a32 ff.).[[13]](#footnote-13) So what makes Aristotle and Spinoza, who both accept that any mention of the being of a thing is to be understood as a reference to one particular entity, arrive at such different conclusions?

For Aristotle, it is pretty much axiomatic that certain differences between things are great enough, in themselves, to preclude a single sense of being in application to those things. Spinoza, by contrast—at least on Deleuze’s reading of him—is prepared to understand all differences between things, however great, as themselves constituting the character of being. (This is what I earlier said that Heidegger fails properly to do—again, on Deleuze’s reading of him.) The difference between Aristotle and Spinoza is thus a fundamental difference of approach. On the Spinozist approach, it is not just that any mention of the being of a thing is to be understood as a reference to one particular entity; any mention of the multiplicity and diversity of things is to be understood as a reference to that entity, whose essence is expressed in the very differences between them.[[14]](#footnote-14) This is what Deleuze calls an ‘affirmation’ of difference. For *x* to be affirmed of *y*, in Deleuze’s sense, is—very roughly—for the essence of *y*, or for the sense of *y*, to be expressed through *x*; and for *x* to be affirmed *tout court* is for *x* to be affirmed of being.[[15]](#footnote-15) This affirmation of difference allows Spinoza to see being *in* the differences between things, rather as one sees a single image in the differences of hue, the differences of brightness, and the differences of location between the myriad different pixels that compose it. It allows him to make sense of things as part of one and the same immanent reality by making integrated sense of what differentiates them.[[16]](#footnote-16)

But Deleuze thinks we can go further. For Spinoza still believes in one privileged unified entity that is prior to all multiplicity, prior to all diversity, prior to all difference. Deleuze thinks we can acknowledge the univocity of being without appeal to any such entity. (To this extent he is in line with Heidegger. Heidegger denied that being is itself an entity.[[17]](#footnote-17)) If we deny that there is any such entity, we can understand any mention of the multiplicity and diversity of things entirely in its own terms and still make sense of things as part of one and the same purely immanent reality. This is not just an affirmation of difference. It is an affirmation of the affirmation of difference. For it allows difference itself to be its own affirmation. Such affirmation is no longer conceived as a reference to some other entity, some single substance in which everything is anchored. There is no such entity. Difference is itself the ultimate reality. Indeed it is itself ever different, like an ever changing image in which the only constancy is the change. Being can still be seen in the differences between things; but it no longer has any stable identity or overall unity of its own. It no longer has any independent status as an entity in its own right.[[18]](#footnote-18)

This is the second of the two approaches that Deleuze considers, the one that he finds in Nietzsche (Deleuze ([2006](#B74)), esp. Ch. 5, and more esp. §§10–13, but see also Deleuze ([1994](#B72)), pp. 35–42). There is a famous sentence on the final page of Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* where he summarizes his thinking by saying, ‘All that Spinozism needed to do for the univocal to become an object of pure affirmation [i.e. affirmation that is affirmation of itself] was to make substance turn around the modes’, and then refers to Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal return which he interprets as providing the wherewithal to do precisely that (Deleuze ([1994](#B72)), p. 304).[[19]](#footnote-19)

It is the Nietzschean approach that Deleuze favours. But on what grounds? On what grounds, for that matter, does he favour Spinoza’s original preparedness to understand all differences as constituting the character of being in defiance of Aristotle’s unpreparedness to do so? Nothing that I have said so far in this essay appears to forestall a simple stand-off between Spinoza and Aristotle; nor, perhaps, between Nietzsche and Spinoza.

It is natural to look for arguments here. And relevant arguments are to be found.[[20]](#footnote-20) Nevertheless, they are not my primary concern in this essay. My primary concern is not with how the univocity of being can be established. It is with something more basic. It is with how the univocity of being can even be properly thought.[[21]](#footnote-21) I hope that some of what I have said so far has helped in this respect. In the second section of this essay I want to recapitulate this material, but in a different form, a form that relates it back to some of the concerns of analytic metaphysicians—and indeed of analytic philosophers more generally.[[22]](#footnote-22)

**2. How to think the univocity of being in logico-syntactic terms (by thinking of its essence as expressed through difference)**

I begin with a matter that might initially appear quite unrelated. Wittgenstein, in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, draws a distinction between what he calls ‘signs’ and what he calls ‘symbols’ (Wittgenstein ([1961](#B365)), 3.31 and 3.32 ff.). Signs are the written marks or noises that we use to communicate. Symbols are signs together with their logico-syntactic use. Logical syntax is akin to ordinary grammar, but deeper. Thus ordinary grammar associates the use of the word ‘are’ in ‘Human beings are animals’ with the use of the word ‘eat’ in ‘Human beings eat animals.’ Logical syntax recognizes differences between these, reflected in the fact that it makes sense to add to the latter sentence, but not to the former, ‘including themselves’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Wittgenstein captures the relation between a sign and a symbol as follows: ‘A sign is what can be perceived of a symbol’ (Wittgenstein ([1961](#B365)), 3.32). And he points out that ‘one and the same sign . . . can be common to two different symbols’ (Wittgenstein ([1961](#B365)), 3.321). Thus the word ‘round’ is sometimes used as a noun to denote a slice of bread, sometimes as an adjective to indicate circularity: one sign, two symbols.

Now I am going to assume the following: *difference of logico-syntactic use is a difference of degree*; in other words, one symbol can share more or less of its logico-syntactic use with another. I do not claim that this doctrine is in the *Tractatus* itself. Whether it is, or whether for that matter its negation is, and in either case how explicitly or implicitly, are large exegetical issues that I shall put to one side. My aim is to make use of Wittgenstein’s ideas, not to rehearse them. Adopting this doctrine seems to me the only plausible and interesting way of extending those ideas, or at least the only plausible and interesting way of extending them that subserves our current purposes.

Here is an illustration of the doctrine. The word ‘round’, as well as having the two meanings already indicated, is also sometimes used as a noun to denote a complete series of holes in golf. This is yet another symbol, different from either of the other two. But it is less different from the other noun than it is from the adjective. This can be seen in the following way. There are many meaningful sentences involving the word ‘round’, such as ‘I had a round yesterday’, in which the meaning of the rest of the sentence prevents the word ‘round’ from functioning as an adjective but still allows it to function as either of the two nouns.[[24]](#footnote-24) In other meaningful sentences, including sentences that build on this one, such as ‘I had a round yesterday and I had it toasted’, the meaning of the rest of the sentence prevents the word ‘round’ from functioning as one of those two nouns but not as the other.[[25]](#footnote-25) However, there is no equivalent transverse ordering. There is no meaningful sentence in which the meaning of the rest of the sentence prevents the word ‘round’ from functioning as one of those two nouns but still allows it to function *either* as the other noun *or* as the adjective.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Now, are there any ambiguities that do not involve any difference of logico-syntactic use, ambiguities that are, so to speak, simple differences of meaning? (In current terms such an ambiguity would involve one symbol, not just one sign.[[27]](#footnote-27)) One’s first thought is that there surely are. But on reflection the matter seems less clear. Exact sameness of logico-syntactic use cuts very finely indeed.[[28]](#footnote-28) *Very* crudely speaking, if there were an ambiguity that involved no difference of logico-syntactic use, there would have to be two things such that whatever could be meaningfully said of one could be meaningfully said of the other. This is of course weaker than the requirement that there be two things such that whatever could be truly said of one could be truly said of the other. Even so, it is still a strong requirement. And who knows but that there are deep reasons of philosophical principle why it could never be met? Considerable work in some or all of metaphysics, philosophical logic, and philosophy of language would be needed to settle the issue.

But here is a more tractable issue. Is it possible to *expose* an ambiguity without exposing any difference of logico-syntactic use? This time there seems little room for doubt. Clearly it is. For it is possible to show that a word is ambiguous by producing a sentence involving the word, the rest of whose meaning is presumed given, and then pointing out that a single utterance of the sentence can be interpreted as true or as false depending on how this particular word is construed. (For instance, imagine my saying, ‘I had a round yesterday’ on the morrow of a day on which I had a slice of toast but did not so much as set foot on a golf course.) The word is thereby shown to be ambiguous even though the question of whether any difference of logico-syntactic use is involved is left open.

Let us now reconsider the univocity of being. And let us think of this issue as an issue about whether the word ‘being’ and its various cognates are relevantly ambiguous.[[29]](#footnote-29) To be sure, this may not be as innocent as it appears. It is not entirely obvious that the issue can be cast in this linguistic form without some loss. But even if it cannot, the new casting of the issue will at the very least be of (highly pertinent) interest.

Anyone committed to the non-univocity of being would in these terms be committed to an ambiguity in the word ‘being’. But the commitment would, I claim, be unsustainable unless the ambiguity could be exposed in a way *other* than that just described. The ambiguity would have to be, *and would have to be seen to be*, an ambiguity involving a difference of logico-syntactic use.

Why do I claim this? For two principal reasons. Or perhaps rather, for one principal reason that can be broached in two ways. First, to think that the word ‘being’ is ambiguous is to think that some things are so different in kind from others that talk about the ‘being’ of the former cannot be understood in the same way as talk about the ‘being’ of the latter. But unless the ‘cannot’ here means ‘cannot, as far as the meaningfulness of the talk is concerned’ as opposed to ‘cannot, as far as the truth of the talk is concerned’, then it is just not clear why anyone would think such a thing. Unless there are differences in kind between things that are so great that the very business of characterizing some of these things requires a different logical syntax from the business of characterizing others, what is to prevent the devising of vocabulary that can be truly applied to all of them? And if nothing is to prevent this, then what is to prevent the devising of a term that can be truly applied to whatever the word ‘being’ can be truly applied to, under each of its supposed interpretations? But given such a term, and given the work that it has to do (notably, enabling us to refer to the character of whatever exists), what is the rationale for thinking that the word ‘being’ is ambiguous in the first place? Why not accept that this new term is just a synonym for ‘being’, with (as we now see) its single generic meaning?[[30]](#footnote-30)

This question leads naturally to the second way of broaching the matter. Unless the ambiguity in the word ‘being’ involved a difference of logico-syntactic use, what rationale would there be for acknowledging different senses of the word ‘being’ as opposed to acknowledging differences among the entities to which the unambiguous word ‘being’ can be truly applied? This is an old idea, famously and marvellously captured by Quine in §27 of his *Word and Object*. Quine is there concerned with a somewhat different issue: whether the terms ‘true’ and ‘exist’ are ambiguous. But his response to the claim that they are is essentially the same as the response that I am now recommending to the claim that ‘being’ is non-logico-syntactically ambiguous. Quine writes, specifically in connection with ‘true’:

There are philosophers who stoutly maintain that ‘true’ said of logical or mathematical laws and ‘true’ said of weather predictions or suspects’ confessions are two usages of an ambiguous word ‘true’ . . . What mainly baffles me is the stoutness of their maintenance. What can they possibly count as evidence? Why not view ‘true’ as unambiguous but very general, and recognize the difference between true logical laws and true confessions as a difference between logical laws and confessions? (Quine ([1960](#B264)), p. 131)

Similarly, I submit, in the case of ‘being’. And note that acceding to a single sense of being in this way would not preclude, in fact would encourage, acknowledging different *kinds* of being corresponding to the various fundamental differences between entities.[[31]](#footnote-31) This is why Heidegger, who is certainly keen to acknowledge different kinds of being—for example, those kinds of being that are peculiarly enjoyed by ‘whos’ and those kinds of being that are peculiarly enjoyed by ‘whats’[[32]](#footnote-32)—can nevertheless be considered a champion of the univocity of being.[[33]](#footnote-33)

In linguistic terms, then, the doctrine of the non-univocity of being had better be construed as the doctrine that the word ‘being’ has more than one logico-syntactic use; that there is one sign here that is common to more than one symbol. A possible analogy would be the use of the existential quantifier ‘∃’ in formal languages to represent both first-order quantification and second-order quantification. There too, arguably, there is one sign that is common to more than one symbol.[[34]](#footnote-34), [[35]](#footnote-35) Nor would the analogy stop there. Anyone who took this view of both ‘being’ and ‘∃’ would no doubt insist that, in the case of ‘being’, just as in the case of ‘∃’, the similarities between how the different symbols are used are sufficiently striking and sufficiently important for the commonality of the sign to be both natural and warranted.[[36]](#footnote-36) This was essentially Aristotle’s position. For Aristotle, the differences in reality to which different senses of being corresponded were categorial differences, deep ‘grammatical’ differences of just the sort envisaged here. But he also insisted that the use of a single word to embrace these different senses of being was both natural and warranted: this was what the comparison with healthiness was intended to show.

To repeat: the advocate of the non-univocity of being had better think that different uses of the word ‘being’ differ in their logico-syntactic use. But this presents a challenge of its own: how to *show* that they do. The sheer fact that the word is used in linguistic contexts which themselves differ in their logico-syntactic use is not decisive. Consider these two contexts: ‘That person is . . . ’ and ‘That tree is . . . ’ These differ in their logico-syntactic use. But it does not follow that the phrase ‘exactly two metres in height’, which can be meaningfully inserted into both, is logico-syntactically ambiguous[[37]](#footnote-37)—not granted the assumption that difference of logico-syntactic use is a difference of degree.[[38]](#footnote-38) Similarly, the fact that we can talk about the ‘being’ of that person and the ‘being’ of that tree does not show that ‘being’ is logico-syntactically ambiguous. It may be a necessary condition of the non-univocity of being that ‘being’ should have application to things that are so different that there is no single logico-syntactic way of making reference to all of them; but it is not a sufficient condition.

The difficulty is exacerbated by the following fact. The simple way of exposing an ambiguity which we considered earlier—namely, producing a sentence involving the ambiguous word and pointing out that a single utterance of it can be interpreted as true or as false, leaving open whether the word is logico-syntactically ambiguous—has no counterpart when it comes to showing that a word *is* logico-syntactically ambiguous. It is of no avail to produce a sentence involving the logico-syntactically ambiguous word and then to point out that a single utterance of it can be interpreted as meaningful or as meaningless. Provided that interpreting an utterance as meaningless is not a contradiction in terms, then this is something that one can do to any utterance whatsoever. (One can always construe some word in the utterance as occurring without either its standard meaning or any other meaning.) It cuts no ice at all where ambiguity is concerned. Given an utterance of the sentence, ‘Her brooch is round’, for example, we can construe ‘round’ as occurring without either its standard adjectival meaning or any other meaning. But that is quite irrelevant to the use of ‘round’ as a noun. *Nothing* about this sentence is relevant to the use of ‘round’ as a noun, given the meaning of the rest of the sentence. The meaning of the rest of the sentence precisely precludes the use of ‘round’ as a noun here.[[39]](#footnote-39)

I am not suggesting that there is no way of exposing a logico-syntactic ambiguity. In the case of the word ‘round’, it is perfectly acceptable simply to point out that the word has both a nominal use and an adjectival use. Or, if there are certain theoretical purposes at hand for which further detail is required, either in connection with the word ‘round’ or in connection with the difference between nouns and adjectives, then we can go into just such further detail. Even in cases where the difference of logico-syntactic use is less marked, as it would be in the case of the word ‘being’, and where the tools for characterizing the difference are not ready to hand, as they might not be in the case of the word ‘being’, we can do what we did where the two uses of ‘round’ as a noun were concerned: produce a sentence involving the ambiguous word (‘I had a round yesterday’) together with a context within which the sentence can be meaningfully embedded under one interpretation but not under the other (‘. . . and I had it toasted’). The problem, however, is that this would be a way of exposing the ambiguity only to those who were already disposed to see it. If there were genuine controversy about whether the word had more than one logico-syntactic use, as there is in the case of the word ‘being’, no such expedient would help to settle the matter. The denier of logico-syntactic ambiguity could simply deny that embedding the given sentence in the given context resulted in any relevant meaninglessness[[40]](#footnote-40)—whilst also of course acknowledging the ever-present and uninteresting possibility noted in the previous paragraph, that the word in question be construed as occurring without any meaning whatsoever.

The advocate of the non-univocity of being may now appear to be in trouble. I have been urging, on the one hand, that the relevant ambiguity in ‘being’ would have to be exposed as a logico-syntactic ambiguity while suggesting, on the other hand, that there would be no exposing it as such that did not essentially involve preaching to the converted. But actually the trouble is just as great for an advocate of the univocity of being. Insofar as there is a kind of surd in what one of them wants to assert, there is a kind of surd in what the other wants to deny. This is why there is an issue, not merely concerning how the univocity of being can be established, but concerning how it can even be properly thought. What can an advocate of the univocity of being do, to impress his doctrine on himself as well as on others, beyond blankly proclaiming that ‘being’ has just one meaning?

Well, one option that he might take is to identify being as an entity in its own right and to insist that any talk of the ‘being’ of a thing is a reference to this entity. But as we saw in section 1, this would not be enough. An Aristotelian would insist that any talk of the ‘healthiness’ of a thing is a reference to health, but would deny that ‘healthiness’ has just one logico-syntactic use. The advocate of the univocity of being would need to insist further that any talk of the ‘being’ of a thing is not just a reference to this entity, but a reference *of one particular logico-syntactic kind* to this entity. But now there would be another *impasse* of sorts. The Aristotelian would see the differences between the things to which the word ‘being’ can be truly applied as simply too great for that to be a viable option.

The most effective way for the advocate of the univocity of being to evade this sort of Aristotelian response is by being pre-emptive. Given various things to which the word ‘being’ can be truly applied, and given the various differences between them, the advocate of the univocity of being can say that precisely one of the functions of the word is to signify these differences; that for these things to be *is* for them to differ in the ways they do; that difference is itself the fundamental character of being.[[41]](#footnote-41) There is then no question of two things’ differing to such an extent that the word ‘being’ has no single logico-syntactic use in relation to both. The very semantics of the word forestalls this.—But wait! Is it not question-begging to appeal to ‘the’ semantics of the word when what is at issue is whether the word even has one logico-syntactic use?—That is not what is at issue. What is at issue is how we can properly *think* of the word as having one logico-syntactic use. And the suggestion is: by first thinking in terms of its semantics; by thinking of its semantics as itself already encompassing all diversity in things. The word ‘being’ is to be understood in such a way that, whenever there are things that differ from one another, even if they differ so much that there is no single logico-syntactic way of making reference to all of them, this word can be truly applied to them, in a single sense, and therefore with a single logico-syntactic use.

One way to regard the shift from thinking of being as an entity in its own right to thinking of difference as the character of being is as follows: it is a shift, in the attempt to think of ‘being’ as having just one logico-syntactic use, from modelling the word on a noun to modelling it on a verb.[[42]](#footnote-42) So long as the word was modelled on a noun—so long as the word was conceived as standing in an invariant semantic relation to one particular entity—there was an issue about whether talk of the ‘being’ of things could do suitable justice to all the ways in which things differ from one another. For even if such talk could secure the univocity of being, how could it do so except at the price of introducing fresh concerns, if not the same old concerns, about the univocity of *participation* in being? And if it did introduce such concerns, how could the obvious regress be blocked, except by locating the really important univocity in precisely that differing of things from one another which was giving pause? But the regress never even starts, nor are there any such concerns, if the word ‘being’ is modelled on a verb and is conceived as expressing such differing in the first place. Substance, the entity to which the noun ‘substance’ refers, is now thought of as turning, the activity to which the verb ‘turn’ refers, around the modes.

Furthermore, to think of difference as the character of being[[43]](#footnote-43) is to allow for the affirmation of the affirmation of difference to which I referred in section 1. What I have in mind is this. The affirmation of difference is what enables being, univocal being, to be seen in the differences between things. It is a making sense of difference, as the face of univocal being, where this is as much difference’s making sense as it is difference’s being made sense of. But if difference is the very character of being, then it is *itself* what enables univocal being to be seen in the differences between things. It is its own affirmation. The making sense of difference is simply things’ differing. The affirmation of difference is the affirmation of the affirmation of difference.

What we have been witnessing—at least, what we have been witnessing if Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche and Spinoza is correct—is the power of the Nietzschean verb over the Spinozist noun, or the power of Nietzschean differing over Spinozist substance. Spinozist substance is an entity that differs from other entities in various ways. Nietzschean differing is not an entity at all. It cannot be said to differ from other entities. It cannot be said to differ from *anything* in the way in which entities differ from one another. On the other hand, it can in a way be said to differ. For there is a sense in which, in the differing of entities from one another, differing itself is ever different. (If it were not, the differing of entities from one another would stand to it in something like the relation of instantiation to a universal, and it would count as an entity after all.) But how can it be said to differ if it cannot be said to differ *from* anything in the way in which entities differ from one another? One way is through a break with traditional grammar: it can be said to differ from itself.[[44]](#footnote-44) And if differing *is* said to differ from itself, this gives further fillip to the idea that the manifestation of being through differing is itself a differing of sorts, a differing through which being is manifest; in other words, that the affirmation of difference is the affirmation of the affirmation of difference.

This is the line taken by Deleuze, in his exposition and defence of the univocity of being. As I have tried to make clear, I have not myself been concerned to defend the doctrine, still less to defend any of the associated exegesis; I have been concerned with what it takes to think the doctrine. But I have had a more particular aim too: to connect what it takes to think the doctrine with issues that exercise analytic philosophers.

Not that this kind of linkage is likely to win any converts. Just the opposite in fact. It is likely to crystallize alternative ways of thinking in the minds of analytic philosophers. Thus many analytic philosophers will recoil from unadorned talk of anything’s differing from itself by demanding some kind of relativization, such as that which allows for talk of Ellen’s differing from herself by being both a child and an adult: a child then and an adult now. Others will recoil no less from relativized talk of something’s differing from itself and they will deny that there is strictly any identity between that girl and this woman.[[45]](#footnote-45) Again, many analytic philosophers will insist that the word ‘differing’, as it occurs in the sentence ‘Differing is not an entity’, functions as a singular term, and—an entity being nothing but what is picked out by a singular term—that the sentence is self-stultifying. They are then liable to conclude that, if differing is anything at all, then it is (perforce) an entity. Others will take a leaf out of each of Frege’s and the early Wittgenstein’s books: they will acknowledge the self-stultification in the sentence ‘Differing is not an entity’ and they will conclude that there is an insight here to which the sentence is gesturing but which cannot strictly be expressed.[[46]](#footnote-46) Those who take this last option will of course be manifesting an element of conciliation. How close they will be to a convergence of view with any champion of the univocity of being is going to depend in part on how comfortable any champion of the univocity of being is with this kind of appeal to the inexpressible: in some cases, I submit, very comfortable.[[47]](#footnote-47) But that is not the point. The point is not about convergence of view. It is not even about *rapprochement*. The point is about dialogue. Some analytic philosophers might eventually feel at home with these ways of thinking; some might even eventually be persuaded by Deleuze to subscribe to the univocity of being. But first they have to be able to listen to what he is saying.[[48]](#footnote-48)

1. In the predicate calculus, assigning a domain to a formal language with an existential quantifier is part of interpreting the language. But that is not what is meant here by settling on an interpretation of the verb ‘exist’. What is meant here would cut across that purely formal exercise by sanctioning the use of the verb ‘exist’ for only some of the things that could be part of any such domain. (Indeed some philosophers, of whom Quine is the most notable example, would take exception to it on precisely those grounds: see Quine ([1960](#B264)), §49.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Two classic texts are Carnap ([1956](#B39)) and Quine ([1961a](#B265)). See also Chalmers, Manley, and Wasserman ([2009](#B43)), whose introduction by Manley provides very helpful orientation. Three recent contributions to the discussion are: Sider ([2011](#B313)), Ch. 9; Parfit ([2011](#B242)), App. J; and Turner ([2010](#B337)). An excellent discussion of how far a disagreement about what exists might be nothing but a disagreement about how to use the verb ‘exist’ is Williamson ([1987](#B360)), esp. §IV. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In Heidegger ([1962a](#B145)) the translators register the former by using a capital ‘B’: see their n. 1 on p. 19. I shall take the liberty of dropping the capitalization in all quotations from this book and other books where the same practice is followed. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. He says that entities include ‘everything we talk about, everything we have in view, everything towards which we comport ourselves in any way’ (Heidegger ([1962a](#B145)), p. 26). But in drawing the distinction between being and entities he also says that ‘the being of entities “is” not itself an entity’ (Heidegger ([1962a](#B145)), p. 26). At the very end of this essay I shall say a little about the apparent tension between these. (I have in mind the fact that precisely what seems to be required of us, for us to be engaged in reflection of this sort, is that we ‘talk about’, ‘have in view’, or ‘in some way comport ourselves towards’ being. A similar problem afflicts the characterization of entities that I ventured in the main text: ‘all the things of which we can make sense’. For Heidegger is intent on making sense of being. Suffice to say, for now, that my references to sense-making in the main text may all need to stand under some suitable tacit restriction; more specifically, they may all need to be understood in such a way as to exclude certain sense-making that is characteristic of Heidegger’s project.) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a fascinating and instructive discussion see McManus ([2013](#B210)). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Deleuze ([1994](#B72)), pp. 64–66; and cf. Smith ([2001](#B314)), pp. 169–170. (I am indebted to Smith’s excellent essay throughout this section.) Note: in a very interesting discussion of Heidegger on different ways of being, Kris McDaniel describes Heidegger as acknowledging ‘several senses of the word “being”’ (McDaniel ([2009](#B197)), p. 309). This suggests that McDaniel sees things very differently from Deleuze. The difference between them is not as great as it appears, however. In fact it is largely terminological. Certainly there is no suggestion in McDaniel’s discussion that Heidegger was an advocate of the radically transcendent. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Note: the Dostoevskian adage, though often attributed to Dostoevsky in the form cited, does not in fact appear in that precise form anywhere in his corpus. The closest it comes to doing so is in the mouth of Mitya Karamazov, in Dostoevsky ([1982](#B87)), Pt. Four, Bk. 11, Ch. 4. There Karamazov says, ‘What’s to become of man then? Without God and without a future life? Why, in that case, everything is allowed. You can do anything you like!’ (p. 691). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This is important. It explains my continual use of the word ‘absolute’ to qualify the kind of transcendence that I am interested in. It is certainly possible for someone who repudiates absolute transcendence to accede to a relative transcendence whereby we have no way of making basic claims about a given entity in *some* of its aspects except by using language that demands to be understood non-literally. Spinoza may have been a case in point. We shall be considering Spinoza’s non-absolutely-transcendent conception of God in due course. But this conception did not, for instance, prevent Spinoza from *both* denying that God loves anyone in any strict sense (Spinoza ([2002](#B316)), Pt. V, Prop. 17, Corollary) *and* allowing for a non-strict sense in which God does love us (Spinoza ([2002](#B316)), Pt. V, Prop. 36, Corollary): the difference is that God’s ‘love’, unlike love properly so-called, is not ‘accompanied by the idea of an external cause’ (Spinoza ([2002](#B316)), Pt. III, ‘Definition of the Emotions’, §6). Whether this betokens relative transcendence or not depends partly on whether such claims about love are suitably basic and partly on whether we have some other, literal way of expressing what we mean when we say, ‘God loves us.’ I shall not pursue that question here. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. It is instructive to consider Descartes in this connection. Descartes acceded, if not to the absolute transcendence of God, then at least to an extreme version of the relative transcendence of God: see e.g. Descartes ([1984](#B79)), Third Meditation, and Descartes ([1985](#B80)), Pt. I, §51. And in a way he would have been happy to concede that we lack any real grasp of what we are talking about when we talk about God: see e.g. Descartes ([1985](#B80)), Pt. I, §25, and Descartes ([1991](#B81)), p. 25. Indeed that helps to fuel his most celebrated argument for the existence of God: the fact that we lack any such grasp helps to show that our idea of God is an idea of something so great that only something that great can explain how we have come by it (Descartes ([1984](#B79)), Third Meditation). But of course, *unless* we have some grasp of what we are talking about when we talk about God, it is not obvious that we have an idea of God in the first place. For discussion see Williams ([1978](#B349)), pp. 143–145. And for discussion of some of the more general issues that arise here see Williams ([2006](#B358)), esp. pp. 14–15. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a helpful discussion see Tonner ([2007](#B333)). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This substance is what Spinoza calls ‘God’: see n. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Deleuze ([1990a](#B70)), pp. 27, 46 ff., and 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Shields ([2012](#B312)) for an interesting discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. These differences, which are differences of power, are what Deleuze characterizes as *intensive* differences: see Deleuze ([1994](#B72)), Ch. V, for an exploration of intensive difference in general and Deleuze ([1990a](#B70)), Pt. Three, for application of this notion to the case of Spinoza. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See e.g. Deleuze ([1994](#B72)), pp. 52 ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Deleuze ([1990a](#B70)), Ch. XI. And cf. some of the metaphors on the very last page, p. 304, of Deleuze ([1994](#B72)). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See n. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I shall say a little more about this in section 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For Deleuze’s interpretation of the doctrine of eternal return see Deleuze ([2006](#B74)), esp. Ch. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See again the material cited earlier in the main text: Deleuze ([2006](#B74)), esp. Ch. 5, and Deleuze ([1994](#B72)), pp. 35–42. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cf. Smith ([2001](#B314)), p. 168, where he quotes a remark that Deleuze himself made in a seminar: ‘[Univocity is] the strangest thought, the most difficult to think, if it has ever been thought.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For a helpful discussion of the material in this section see (in addition to Smith ([2001](#B314)), to which I have already made several references) de Beistegui ([2004](#B69)), pp. 225–241. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. It is often said that symbols are signs together with their *meaning*, and not just their logico-syntactic use: see e.g. Black ([1964](#B23)), p. 130. That this is wrong is well argued by Johnston ([2007](#B165)). But see below for why the difference between these may not be as great as it seems. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Is this perhaps contestable? What if someone were to insist that the word ‘had’, in this example, is itself correspondingly ambiguous, meaning either ‘ate’ or ‘played’? So be it. The point that I am making then merely requires a different example, say with the word ‘enjoyed’ in place of the word ‘had’. If someone were to deny that there is *any* example that suits my purposes, then I suspect that they would simply be assuming the opposite of what I am assuming—that difference of logical syntax is a straightforward difference of kind—in which case their denial would lie outside the ambit of my discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Is *this* perhaps contestable? What if someone were to insist that the word ‘round’, in this example, can function as either noun; it is just that, in one case, the sentence can only be used to say something false? I would deny that. I think an utterance of ‘I had a complete series of holes yesterday and I had it toasted’ would be meaningless, not false. But I agree that this is contentious. The contentiousness will be significant later. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. If it is true that difference of logico-syntactic use is a difference of degree, then that seems to me to have a bearing on a number of other philosophical issues. In particular, I think it has a bearing on Frege’s problem about the semantics of predicates: see Frege ([1997a](#B122)). It is far beyond the scope of this essay to go into detail about what I have in mind. But I can give an indication of what I have in mind by quoting from Wright’s essay on this problem. Wright writes, ‘[We could] stipulate that “refers to” should have a use linking the name of a predicate to an expression—par excellence, the predicate itself—for its semantic value. In that case, “‘is a horse’ refers to is a horse” . . . would be well-formed, but—just for that reason—“refers to”, so used, would not speak of the relation that holds between a singular term and the object for which it stands’ (Wright ([1998](#B380)), p. 256, some emphasis removed). But why not, if difference of logico-syntactic use were a difference of degree? For then a single symbol could combine in the same way with other symbols, even though those other symbols had a different logico-syntactic use from each other. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See n. 23. The discussion that ensues in the main text explains the final sentence in that note. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. E.g. consider the ambiguity of the word ‘billion’, used in American English to denote a thousand million and used in British English to denote a million. That may look like an ambiguity that does not involve a difference of logico-syntactic use. But I think there is a good case for saying that, even in that case, a difference of logico-syntactic use is involved. For it seems to me that, in the sentence ‘The number of stars in the Andromeda nebula is less than a billion but more than a thousand million’, the meaning of the rest of the sentence prevents the word ‘billion’ from functioning as the American-English noun. Admittedly, this is a matter of contention—essentially the same contention as was noted in n. 25—but in this context that is as much as it needs to be. For I claim only that it is not *obvious* that there are ambiguities that do not involve a difference of logico-syntactic use. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. I add ‘relevantly’ because the word ‘being’ itself functions as a non-count noun, as a count noun, and as a present participle, but these ambiguities cut right across the issue of the univocity of being. Henceforth, I shall take such a qualification for granted. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. These are rhetorical questions: but see Turner ([2010](#B337)) for discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Cf. Deleuze ([1990b](#B71)), p. 185. This relates to the point that I made about McDaniel in n. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For the distinction between a ‘who’ and a ‘what’ see <<CE: Reference Heidegger (1962 has not been provided in the Bibliography. Please check.>>Heidegger (1962), p. 71. For the recognition of different kinds of being see <<CE: Reference Heidegger (1962 has not been provided in the Bibliography. Please check.>>Heidegger (1962), p. 26. And see <<CE: Reference Heidegger (1962 has not been provided in the Bibliography. Please check.>>Heidegger (1962), §20, for admonishment of Descartes for not appreciating that different kinds of being do not equate with different senses of being. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Parfit presents reasons for thinking, contra Quine, that ‘exist’ is ambiguous (Parfit ([2011](#B242)), pp. 720 ff.). I do not myself find these reasons compelling. For an excellent defence of Quine’s view (which nevertheless involves a complete misunderstanding of what Heidegger means by ‘being’) see van Inwagen ([2009](#B339)). For further relevant material see Wittgenstein ([1969a](#B367)), p. 58 and Quine ([1960](#B264)), pp. 241–242.—Note: Ryle’s remarks, in Ryle ([1949](#B305)), Ch. I, §3, are often taken to epitomize the view under attack here, by Quine and van Inwagen themselves among others (see Quine ([1960](#B264)), p. 131, n. 2 and van Inwagen ([2009](#B339)), pp. 485 ff.). But in current terms Ryle is surely an exponent of the view that ‘exist’ is ambiguous in a way that involves a difference of logico-syntactic use: see Price ([2009](#B256)), p. 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. I add ‘arguably’ for at least two reasons. First, it is not entirely uncontroversial that ‘∃’ has both these uses: for some famous dissent see Quine ([1970a](#B271)), pp. 66 ff.; see also van Inwagen ([2002](#B338)). Secondly, even if ‘∃’ does have both these uses, it is not obvious that they are logico-syntactically different uses: some material later in the main text bears on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. I am taking for granted in this essay that if a sign is common to more than one symbol, then it is ambiguous. For a fascinating argument to the contrary see Williams ([1996](#B346)). But I wonder how deep the disagreement between Williams and me is: see e.g. Williams’ own reference to the possibility of settling this matter by stipulation (Williams ([1996](#B346)), pp. 59–60), and see David Wiggins’ reply to Williams in Wiggins ([1996](#B346)), §§35–40. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Wittgenstein ([1961](#B365)), 5.52is relevant here, as is Turner ([2010](#B337)), §II. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. This is the material that I had in mind at the end of n. 34: the sheer fact that ‘∃’ can occur alongside both individual variables and predicate variables, if it is a fact, is not decisive for the logico-syntactic ambiguity of ‘∃’. For pertinent discussion see Quine ([1970a](#B271)), Ch. 2; but note that Quine’s notion of grammar is considerably looser than the notion of logico-syntactic use at work in this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. A related point is that there is relative transcendence as well as absolute transcendence. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. The considerations in this paragraph owe much to Wittgenstein ([1961](#B365)), 5.473–5.4733. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. This is what I had in mind in n. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Cf. Deleuze ([1994](#B72)), p. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Cf. Deleuze ([1990b](#B71)), 26th Series. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. A famous remark of Nietzsche’s is pertinent here: ‘To impose upon becoming the character of being—that is the supreme will to power’ (Nietzsche ([1967](#B241)), §617). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See Moore ([2012](#B227)), Ch. 7, §7, for a discussion of this sort of break with traditional grammar, and Moore ([2012](#B227)), Concl., §3(b), for application of the discussion to this very case. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See Lewis ([1986](#B190)), pp. 204–206. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. See Frege ([1997a](#B122)), esp. p. 184; and Wittgenstein ([1961](#B365)), 4.12 ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. I particularly have in mind Heidegger: see Heidegger ([1999](#B148)), §§27 and 265. This relates back to the apparent tension in Heidegger to which I referred in n. 4. I believe that the tension is real, and that Heidegger’s own appeal to the inexpressible serves a similar function to that of the analytic philosophers envisaged in the main text. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. I am very grateful to Denis McManus and Philip Turetzky for comments that helped me to improve this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)