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COMPOSITIONS OF BEING: METAPHYSICAL AND NON-METAPHYSICAL WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING AND DISCERNING THEM

In order to speak with understanding about the so-called compositions of being that determine the nature of beings, we need to call attention to the various ways these can be thought of, depending on the ways in which they are singled out and known. The mathematician, for instance, understands compositions in one way when he says that some set or number is composed of elements; these elements are abstract constructions. The physicist understands them in another way when he says that matter is composed of corpuscles, waves, quanta, quarks, or photons. The carpenter, in turn, understands compositions in yet another way; for him a table is composed of legs and a top. All the parts discerned by them can be made independent, described quantitatively and qualitatively, exchanged, and replaced with others.

It is not, however, that all the compositions which exist in things can be known and singled out in the way mentioned above. A piece of paper will suffice for an example, of which we say that it is composed of two opposite sides, and we experience the reality of the existence of

those sides, but we cannot physically divide and separate them without destroying the sheet. Likewise we deal with matter and shape, body and spirit, whose reality in a thing we experience. But we cannot divide and separate, for instance, the shape (form) of a small table from its matter, or the reverse, we cannot separate the matter of a small table from its shape (form) so that they would exist on their own. They exist only and exclusively by the existence of the whole. It is likewise with a thought and the object of a thought, with a feeling and the subject of a feeling, etc. In order to see this, the most recent microscope, the most refined method of cognition, or the most refined method for discerning compositions, are not sufficient. What is required here is a separate treatment compatible with what the whole of a being is and what determines its nature—namely existential metaphysics.

This paper is going to analyze different ways of understanding compositions of being, and different methods for discerning them. It will consider non-metaphysical (physical, scientific, phenomenological, abstractionist) interpretations in order to decide whether metaphysics can use them to discover and gain knowledge of the elements that determine the deepest structure of beings, and which set their mode of being.

The issue of compositions of being is returning to discussion today due to genetic engineering, the technologies of cloning and producing mutations, etc., which seem to abolish all the boundaries that determine the identity of things. The discussion concerns various kinds of experiments connected with the regrouping of the elements of a being, the replacement of those with others, and the production of some elements from others. Moreover, the question arises whether things are mere “assemblages,” and whether the learned man of today is a modern “demiurge” who, while looking at a paradigm of the world, creates and composes new things.

The Physical Understanding of Compositions of Being and the Method for Discerning Them

The way physics understands compositions of being, and the method physics uses for singling them out are most widespread in the natural sciences today. In the framework of the physical interpretation, all types of composition, parts, and elements are conceived of as wholes. Compositional parts in this conception may be qualitatively described (an atom, proton, quark, momentum, force, hand, foot, circle, cell, gene), and enumerated quantitatively. Each of the elements (compositional parts) has its own substrate that—in virtue of the application of a proper method—can be singled out, described, and identified as an independent whole. According to Aristotle, a physical element is a body of the type “into which other bodies may be analysed, present in them potentially or in actuality . . . and not itself divisible into bodies different in form.”¹

The method that serves to single out compositions of this type is proportional to the object investigated and to the purpose of investigation. If the investigated object is a tree, a chair, or a human organism, then the method for singling out parts may be a knife, a saw, or a scalpel. If the object of inquiry is a cell or an atom, then the method for singling out parts must be more refined. Such a method may be the application of a complicated apparatus such as an accelerator in the laboratories of physicists, or a microscope for biologists and medical doctors, or a modern laser.

There are many theories in physics connected with understanding the structure of matter (Eddington, Bridgman, de Broglie) that underlie various interpretations of compositions of being. The common feature of those theories is an aspiration to treat all types of compositional factors as independently existing wholes that are qualitatively and quanti-

¹ Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, trans. J. L. Stocks, III, 3, available at: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/heavens.html>.

tatively determined, that can exist before and apart from the thing composed of them. Things are conceived of as aggregates, that is, as special “assemblages” made up of those elements, where to be a whole means to be a derivative of the sum of the compositions from those elements.

This interpretation, and also the method for singling out compositions of being that corresponds to this interpretation, although useful for physicists and natural scientists, cannot be applied to metaphysical cognition. In metaphysical cognition we are searching for the elements whereby a being exists, acts, and receives actions, and whereby we can ultimately understand and explain the specific mode of being of the world of persons, animals, plants, and things.

The limitation of this interpretation, and also of the method for singling out compositions of this type, follows from several reasons.

First, as a result of this interpretation we arrive at the reduction of all compositions within being to components that exist in the manner of independent whole, which are prior to the whole, and which can be made independent. Meanwhile, in daily experience we discover elements that we cannot in any way physically separate from each other, indicate their independent substrata, or treat them as independent wholes. Again, an example could be the opposite sides of a sheet of paper. Their reality is empirically confirmed by us, yet in no way can we divide them off from the whole or treat them as independent. It is likewise with the form and the matter of a chair, table, or house, with the soul and the body in man, etc. These compositions exist by the existence of the whole and cannot exist independently. The physicist or natural scientist cannot in any way discover and describe either these compositions or the whole in which they exist. The methods they use do not permit them to do that. This does not mean that such compositions do not occur in a being, even though a physicist or naturalist does not make note of their existence. It means only that such compositions cannot be discovered by the instruments that the natural scientist uses.

Second, in the knowledge process of physics we discover only material elements, but not all the compositions of being can be reduced to those elements. It is enough for us to consider a human being; in a human being's life and action we discover elements such as the immaterial faculties of the intellect and the will, and the acts that correspond to them such as thinking, free decisions, and emotions. Also in material objects we can see not only material elements but also immaterial elements that include, for instance, a project that comes from the human intellect and has the nature of the intellect, not the nature of matter.

Third, in this interpretation parts are treated as if they were absolute and as things that exist before the whole—the whole which is conceived as the sum of its parts.

Fourth, the elements discerned with the methods of the natural and mathematical sciences are not natural parts. They are derivatives of the methods or instruments whereby they are discerned.

Mieczysław A. Krąpiec remarks as follows:

With quantitative language we can express only quantitatively organized matter insofar as it can be apprehended with the help of a corresponding instrument of measurement without any concern about greater distortion (for indeed, there is the problem of the limit of measurement, and this is both from the measuring device and from the quantitative measured matter). If, then, quantitative language expresses such a narrow scope of the knowability of being, and if many elements of being are not apprehended in that language, then on that account it can be excluded from metaphysics, which has the task of apprehending cognitively being as being.²

Consequently, in the process of metaphysical cognition, we must reject the physical sciences' way of understanding compositions of beings and the method those sciences use to single out those compositions. We must forego bringing that method over to metaphysics. Oth-

² Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, *Metafizyka [Metaphysics]* (Lublin 1988), 226.

erwise everything that is immaterial in beings will be reduced to what is material, to elements that do not exist in the way of the whole, elements that have material substrata and can exist in the manner of independent parts. It is crucial for us to be aware of this in order to understand the limits of all physical and natural interpretations. They do not allow to understand the nature of beings and their deepest structure.

The Scientific Understanding of the Compositions of Being and the Method for Discerning Them

The view that natural and mathematical sciences are the only rational ideal of scientific knowledge became a central issue in the second half of the nineteenth century because of the influence of positivists and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. That view was presented at the beginning of the twentieth century as the one and only “scientific worldview,” and the term “science” was univocally associated with the natural and mathematical sciences.³ According to the scientific view, the only valuable knowledge is knowledge based on direct perception. The adherents of scientism also hold to determinism with respect to how things exist, and they hold to empiricism with respect to how things are known. M. A. Krąpiec explains this as follows:

That which is usually regarded as things in themselves is a sum of the contents of sensory impressions; the thing in itself, in turn, is a construction of the impressions given to us. Science, while avoiding to answer the question of “why?,” has the task of affirming and describing the facts. Although one can arrive at universal truths by careful generalization, those truths are in a proper sense reports concerning facts.⁴

³ See Stanisław Kamiński, *Nauka i metoda. Pojęcie nauki i klasyfikacja nauk* [Science and method. The concept of science and the classification of the sciences], ed. A. Bronk (Lublin 1992), 96 ff.

⁴ Krąpiec, *Metafizyka*, 227.

One of the principles of scientism states that the purpose of science is not so much to explain and describe the nature of things or phenomena, as to provide man with effective tools for mastering nature.

Another principle of scientism states that everything that exists has the same nature and can be apprehended in the framework of the same kind of cognition. Both then the whole and its parts are of the same nature. To know the nature and structure of a being is to know the elements of a being. For in each element, knowledge concerning the whole of the thing is contained.

The third principle that can be formulated on the basis of scientism states that only what can be apprehended in sensory cognition is real. This view became widespread in contemporary natural sciences, and it is the theoretical rationale and substructure for the scientific interpretation of the compositions of being and the way they are discerned. Facts, events, elements, and properties, that is, everything that is given to us in sensory impressions, can be regarded as real if we affirm them empirically and describe in terms of content the substrate of those impressions. If we cannot indicate the substrate of the impressions, we must reject them as unscientific, ideal, and irrational. According to the adherents of scientism, the components of being such as act, form, soul, intellect, love, person, and subject are among the groundless "impressions."

The rejection of the scientific interpretation of the understanding of the compositions of being, and the rejection of the method for discerning those compositions as a method that is useless for metaphysical cognition, are dictated by the need to avoid the error of reductionism in which all compositional elements of being are reduced to material elements. Moreover, the nature of the parts is reduced to the nature of the whole. As a result of the method accepted, the compositional wealth of things through which the nature of beings is shown is obscured. Thus is it not strange that the method not only does not allow us to reach the components of the beings that actually determine their nature, but in ad-

dition it does not lead to the discovery of the truth concerning the nature of things.

If the philosopher looks through the “glasses” of the adherent of scientism, he will be doomed to make mistakes, and that will end in losing the truth concerning the nature of existing beings (persons, animals, plants, and things). Knowledge concerning the deepest structure of things will also be closed to him.

The Phenomenological Understanding of Compositions of Being and the Method for Discerning Them

The method of phenomenological cognition underlies the phenomenological interpretation of the compositions of being. The term “phenomenology” as such implies the study of “phenomena.” “Of phenomena,” as Jean-François Lyotard explains:

that is to say, of *that* which appears to consciousness, *that* which is “given.” It seeks to explore this given—“the thing itself” which one perceives, of which one thinks and speaks—without constructing hypotheses concerning either the relationship which binds this phenomena to the being *of which* it is phenomena, or the relationship which unites it with the *I for which* it is phenomena. One must not go beyond the piece of wax in doing a philosophy of extended substance, nor in doing a philosophy of the a priori spatial forms of sensibility; one must remain with the piece of wax itself, describe only what is given, without presuppositions.⁵

The apprehension of the essence of a thing, the essence of a phenomenon, part, or property, is based on the method of imaginative variation of that which is given in an evidentiary beholding. As Roman Ingarden explains:

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, trans. Brian Beakley (SUNY Press, 1991), 32–33.

in each case, direct experience is the source and foundation of the knowledge of every theory. Every direct experience possesses its own typical cognitive value that we must recognize. Faced with the data of the experience, we cannot take any position other than that of passive, though intelligent, viewers (i.e., those who understand what the object, as it were, says about itself), and we must simply acknowledge what the experience gives to us and take it exactly as it is given to us by the experience.⁶

Thus to know the phenomenon of a being or of an element, they must be an object of evidentiary beholding and must be a datum of experience. R. Ingarden explains it as follows:

The data of experience not only make it possible for us to know objects, but moreover they have a force of rational justification, which on the one hand motivates our beliefs, and on the other hand verifies acquired concepts and judgements concerning given objects. Whatever content of our beliefs, our non-evidentiary suppositions, cannot be shown in the data of experience, it should be rejected as untrue. And conversely, whatever we obtain with the help of purely mental operations must be capable of being shown in the data of experience if it is to be regarded as true.⁷

It should be noted that that which constitutes the object of phenomenological inquiry is the phenomenon that constitutes the “evidentiary datum.” The end-purpose of cognition is to reach the essence of what is given. J. F. Lyotard explains it as follows:

The proceedings of imaginational variation give us the essence itself, the being of the object. The object (*Objekt*) is “anything whatsoever,” for example the number two, the note C, a circle, any proposition or perceptible datum whatsoever (*Ideas I*). We perform the “variation” arbitrarily, obeying only the present and actual evidence of the “I can” or the “I cannot.” The essence, or

⁶ Roman Ingarden, “Dążenie fenomenologów [The aspiration of Phenomenologists],” in idem, *Z badań nad filozofią współczesną [Some Inquiries on Contemporary Philosophy]* (Warsaw 1963), 290.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

eidōs, of the object is constituted by the invariant that remains identical throughout the variations. Thus if we operate the variation on the perceptible thing as object, we obtain the ‘way of being’ of any such thing: a spatio-temporal whole, endowed with secondary qualities and presented as substance and causal unity. The essence is therefore experienced in an actual, concrete intuition. This “vision of essences” (*Wesenschau*) has nothing of a metaphysical character, nor is the theory of essences itself framed within a Platonic realism where the existence of the essence would be assumed; the essence is only that in which the “thing itself” is revealed to me in an *originary givenness*.⁸

The assertion that it is impossible to be otherwise means that the essence of a thing has been reached.

It should be remarked that the foundation of eidetic beholding is the evident datum that is the phenomenon of a thing. Meanwhile the sub-ontic elements for which we search in metaphysical inquiries are, first of all, not given directly and, for that reason, they cannot be objects of evident beholding. Second, they are discovered indirectly and are understood in the context of the whole. Moreover, third, the elements that we seek in metaphysical cognition do not exist independently and are not ontic wholes. Fourth, it is impossible to apprehend the essence of these elements without falling into the error of reductionism.

The phenomenological method of discerning the compositions of being leads by necessity to the idealization of cognitive apprehensions, to the treatment of them as independent factors of being, and to the blurring of the difference between the part and the whole, between a property and the subject of a property, between what is material and what is immaterial, etc. The method of phenomenological cognition, as M. A. Krapiec explains, while presenting Ingarden’s erroneous description of prime matter as an example of the application of this method:

⁸ Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, 39–40.

is not suitable to determine the “compositional” structure of being. For indeed, all our concepts are modelled on the concepts of independent material objects, on material beings . . . whereas the component elements of being are not, and cannot be, beings. Thus our cognition of those elements is only indirect and intrinsically analogical.⁹

The transfer of the phenomenological method of description to the area of metaphysics becomes useless for discovering the structure of beings. For indeed, the purpose of metaphysical cognition is to reach the sub-ontic elements which are not given evidently and do not exist independently, which cannot be separated or made independent, and—what is most important—which can have a different nature, for they can be material or immaterial.

The Abstractionist Understanding of Compositions of Being and the Method for Discerning Them

Abstractionism states that every act of knowing a concrete object or an element of such an object can be performed in the framework of a constructed abstract concept. Thus all known objects and the elements of those objects have the status of abstractions. According to this interpretation, in order to know the concrete John, we must construct the abstraction “man.” In order to know the concrete apple tree, we must construct the abstraction “tree.” In order to know a concrete compositional element of being, e.g., form, matter, essence, existence, soul, or body, we must construct an abstraction corresponding to those elements. For indeed, the whole of intellectual cognition is expressed in conceptual, i.e. abstract, cognition. M. A. Krąpiec explains the what abstractionism implies as follows:

That which is not in conceptual cognition, or that whose concept cannot be constructed, do not exist at all. Also in this light we can and must preclude many controversial questions—e.g.,

⁹ Krąpiec, *Metafizyka*, 233.

whether there is a difference between essence and existence in being—as pseudo-problems, since no one ever constructed a proper concept of existence. Thus there is no existence at all as some sort of “thing different” from essence.¹⁰

When it is brought to refer to the interpretation of sub-ontic compositions and of the method for discerning them, this theory is inadequate. This is because, first, not every intellectual act of cognition must conclude in the construction of some sort of concept. Second, that which does not exist after the manner of a whole cannot be apprehended after the manner of an object. Third, in the framework of the abstractionist interpretation, all objects of apprehension are treated as conceptual constructs. Hence elements such as matter, form, substance, accident, soul, intellect, etc., are only constructed abstractions and nothing more. Fourth, everything that cannot be apprehended in the framework of concepts possesses the status of existence of an abstraction, not that of a real object. Fifth, the results of metaphysical cognition are treated as purely abstract constructs that have a greater connection with our cognition than with the nature of things.

The Metaphysical Understanding of Compositions of Being and the Method for Discerning Them

By metaphysical compositions of being we understand elements (factors) without which a being could not exist at all, or under a specific aspect. Also, without those elements, a being could not properly act, be actualized, or be perfected. In connection with this, we distinguish elements of composition that occur in beings, but which are not compositions of being. Here are some examples: the leg in a chair is a compositional element but it is not a metaphysical (ontic) element since it does not determine the chair's existence. The chair can exist without one of its legs. It cannot, however, exist without matter or form. Likewise in

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

man, a hand, a leg, an eye, and an ear are elements of composition, but they are not metaphysical elements. The man can exist without them. The man, however, cannot exist without the body or the soul. And those elements are metaphysical elements in the case of man.

Hence, first, metaphysical elements can be called sub-ontic elements, that is, elements of being without which a being could not exist.

Second, the main feature of metaphysical elements is that those elements do not exist and cannot exist independently apart from the concrete being. The form of this particular chair cannot exist apart from this particular chair, and the matter of this chair cannot exist apart from this chair. The top side of the piece of paper cannot exist without the piece of paper. Likewise in man, as the soul cannot exist without the body, so the body cannot exist without the soul.

Third, a typical feature of metaphysical elements is the fact that we should understand them analogically, not univocally. M. A. Krapiec warns, however, that we must remember the following:

Our cognition presents to us “elements” of a really existing being in the “language of being,” and so as elements that, after the manner of a material thing, are somehow “reified,” and as independent components, as “pieces” of a being. For indeed, each of our concepts presents in greater or lesser degree a close whole, since our language is formed in the cognition of the material world and its separately existing “parts.” Thus we must reflect on and on in order to constantly correct our language, which is not suited to the cognition of independently existing compositional elements.¹¹

This means that if we speak of matter as a metaphysical element, then the matter of which we speak is not something univocal. Hence, when we speak of the matter of a chair and the matter of a tree, or of a man, in each of these cases we are dealing with matter in a different sense. M. A. Krapiec writes the following:

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

the acquired cognitive results will bear names such as those we use in the case of universal and univocal concepts, e.g., “matter,” “form,” “essence,” “nature,” “person,” “substance,” and “accident.” All the names, however, that occur in metaphysics have analogical meanings, and so they are connected with the concept of being and are judgements in our cognition rather than univocal concepts. They “indicate” each concrete thing in which its content—universally named, e.g., “form”—is realized in an analogical, that is, unique and unrepeatable, way; for in reality “form” is one and unrepeatable, although it performs proportionally the same function in different beings.¹²

We do not give those elements a univocal understanding, but we indicate similarity (analogy) in performing a definite function in a concrete being.

Fourth, a typical feature of metaphysical elements is that there is a real difference between them, but not the sort of difference that there is between one object and another, rather the sort of difference that is between a whole and its part, e.g., the sort of difference that exists between John and his head. We call this type of difference a real (positive) inadequate difference (in the terminology of classical philosophy).¹³

We can speak of the real (adequate) difference that occurs between one thing and another (e.g., between John and a tree, between the eye and the ear), and the thought-based difference that occurs between

¹² *Ibid.*, 239.

¹³ In Krapiec’s metaphysics we encounter the following division of difference: I. Thing-based difference: (1) a negative difference (man—non-man, thing—its negation); (2) a positive difference (a) “greater,” or real, between two things: (a.1) adequate (as one thing and another thing), (a.2) inadequate (a thing and its part, usually an integral part); (b) “lesser,” or modal (a thing and its modality, e.g. John standing and sitting); II. A thought-based (non-thing-based) difference: (1) conceptual-cognitive: (a) “greater” (between the contents of universal concepts); (b) “lesser” (between the contents of “transcendental” concepts); (2) conceptual-creative (when we produce concepts of some sort not in view of the thing itself): (a) without a foundation in a thing; (b) with a foundation in another thing (cf. *ibid.*, 241).

our concepts or between concepts and things. Meanwhile every day we discover compositions that we experience as real and that we cannot treat as independent in existence, and cannot divide them without destroying the whole of the being (e.g., the opposite sides of a piece of paper, the matter and form of a chair), because they exist by the existence of the whole. For this reason, with respect to a proper understanding of compositions of being, we indicate the ways in which they are different, which do not so much show their mutual non-identity as they show their actual real differentiation in relation to the whole of the being (the form in relation to the whole of the table, the matter in relation to the whole of the table).

To discover and perceive compositions of this type, however, it is not sufficient to use the instruments of the physicist, no matter how refined the instruments may be. Even with the most refined instruments that the physicist or natural scientist use, we cannot discover such, it would seem, elementary compositions as matter and form, essence and existence, soul and body, or the thought that is written in things, the end-purpose that is put in them, etc. Likewise, the instruments of the chemist or biologist are not sufficient to perceive the soul in a living organism, the thought in a brain, higher sentiments in chemical processes, etc. In order to discover them, we must equip ourselves with a new set of instruments, the instruments typical of metaphysical inquiry, and we must learn how to use them. All that is necessary to discover the nature of existing beings.

Conclusion

How can metaphysical compositions of being be discerned? The analysis of the fundamental modes of the existence of the things given to us in experience is the foundation for discerning metaphysical compositions of being. We affirm those fundamental modes of the being of things in our judgement-based cognition, and we subject them to a process of analysis that aims to discover and indicate such factors within

being that will ultimately explain to us the discerned mode of the being of things. Among the fundamental modes of the being of things, we can include the dynamic, identity-based, mutable, plural, contingent, caused, and analogical modes of being.

As we search for the internal and objective reasons for such modes of the being of things, in the course of metaphysical explanation we discover the necessary elements without which a state of being given to us in experience could not occur. The method to which we resort in order to discern those compositions of being is the method of metaphysical separation. By this method we discover the sub-ontic elements, and by an analysis of the mode of the being of things we determine the nature of those factors under the aspect of content (what they are).

The process of separation-based discernment of sub-ontic elements takes the following course:

1. *First Stage.* In existential judgements we affirm particular states of the being of things (the dynamic, mutable, identity-based, contingent, caused, and analogical states), e.g., “John exists as acting,” “John exists and acts,” “the tree exists as developing,” “the tree exists and develops.”

2. *Second Stage.* The analysis of existential judgements that affirm particular states of being: (a) Existent John exists and acts; the existent tree exists and develops (but John and his action, and the tree and its action, are not the same); (b) In existent and acting John we discern the existent and acting subject, and the action itself.

3. *Third Stage.* The generalization of analyses on the basis of analogy in being. Every individual substance that exists and acts has in itself an element of act and potency. Thus act and potency are factors internal to being (sub-ontic factors) that explain and render free of contradiction the dynamism of things.

We should note that the metaphysical method for the discernment of the compositions of being is diametrically different from the methods we encounter in the natural, mathematical, or physical sci-

ences. In metaphysics, the discerned elements or factors are not theoretical constructs or hypothetical models, but they are real and necessary elements that constitute objective reasons for explaining the modes of the being of things. Those compositional elements cannot be presented after the manner of wholes, hence there is a fundamental difficulty in identifying and describing them. On the other hand, only compositional elements of this type show the true nature of beings. The discernment of those elements is important not only for metaphysical cognition, but also for cognition in the natural, mathematical, and physical sciences.

Today, as the structure of things is encroached and there are attempts to modify things genetically in various ways, to produce mutations, and to clone living beings, the questions of the identification of the elements of being (sub-ontic elements) of things become fundamental questions. The answer to those questions can show the limits for intervention in the internal structure of things and the dangers associated with that type of intervention. The problem of disturbing the nature of things and other problems of that type, that follow from the modern techniques used in genetic engineering, also appear. Those problems are important all the more so as they concern man. Man also becomes an object of various types of modification, mutation, and genetic engineering.

Translated from Polish by Hugh McDonald

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SUMMARY

This article discusses different ways of understanding compositions of being, and different methods for discerning them. It considers non-metaphysical (physical, scientific, phenomenological, abstractionist) interpretations in order to decide whether metaphysics can use them to discover and gain knowledge of the elements that determine the

deepest structure of beings, and which set their mode of being. The paper shows how much the metaphysical method for discerning the compositions of being is different from non-metaphysical methods.

KEYWORDS

ontic, subontic, composition, being, method, discernment, metaphysics, physics, scientism, phenomenology, abstractionism, interpretation, structure, nature, whole, part.

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