

What is Formal Ontology?

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Abstract

I argue that ontology should not simply be taken to be the study of general features of everything that exists, since all science is about the general features of existing things. More precisely, ontology is about things that are only *insofar as they are*. The question is what that means, and its answer will emerge in a discussion of the way in which ontology may be *formal*.

Formal ontology is not the same as *formalized* ontology. Rather, it is formal in that it abstracts from matter in the following two senses. First, matter may be taken to be that which may only be addressed by demonstrative expressions and not by virtue of any general feature. Formal ontology will abstract from matter in this sense by refusing to employ demonstratives in order to relate to what it studies.

In a second sense, matter may be taken to be that which is *given* in any particular experience. All experience must contain an element that is *not* given, since before we can investigate an object, we need to identify it. We identify objects by virtue of certain features they have, and after doing so we do not *find out* that these objects have these features. In this sense, the features in question are not given.

By abstracting from matter in the second sense, formal ontology will study the features by means of which we identify objects before doing anything further with them. There are some features that are never given and that must always be used in order to identify objects. For instance, we must identify everything *as* an object before we may find out anything about it. These features are the features that objects have only *insofar as they are*. As a consequence, all ontology turns out to be formal ontology.