



The Problem of Being in Hegel

Peter Z. Alawa

Department of Philosophy, University of Port Harcourt
peteralawa@yooh.com 07066784981

ABSTRACT

The answer to the question ‘what is being’? it is a difficult question. The difficulty comes because the term “being” has different understanding right from ancient to contemporary period. But we have a problem and the person who created this problem is Parmenides of Elea who says being “is” and non-being “is not”. This problem continues among philosophers those who accepted Parmenides position and those who rejected it. But it was Hegel who attempted to give solution to this problem by saying that in being there is non-being.

INTRODUCTION

The problem of being historically speaking is by no means a simple one. The source of the difficulty is that the term “being” has different connotations, which it has gathered through the course of history of philosophy. The term “being” has perplexed the minds of philosophers right from Pre-Socratic age till contemporary epoch. To the problem of being we turn.

The problem of being

The term “being even though it cannot be defined, it has an origin. “Being” etymologically speaking means in Latin (*Ens*), Greek (*On*), French (*Etant*) German (*Sein*), which connotes existing. Being is the which exists or is capable of existing. According to Martin Heidegger in his book, An introduction to Metaphysics he says:

... Sein (being) this substantive goes back to the infinitive “Sein” (to be) which belongs with the forms you are, he is, we were, they have been. “Being” as a substantive came out of the verb; the word “being” is a verbal “substantive”.¹

The Problem of Being in Hegel

Heidegger is saying that being is the participle of the verb to be and the verb “to be” means to exist, to have existence. Taken as noun in the substantive form, it is equivalent to that which exists.

Generally speaking “to be” is to exist, from the earlier stage of philosophy; the word being was not a problem, since by nature angles can exist as well. But later in the contemporary period some philosophers especially Sartre says that existence proceeds essence which means there is no essence first. It means one must exist before one creates value to his/her existence. Now let us reflect on the historical background of the problem of being.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM OF BEING

Ancient Period

The Ionians, Atomists, and the Pythagoreans meditated on nature, looking around them, they see things coming into existence and dropping out of existence. Men were born, lived and died. These men were not satisfied with answers given about specific questions of change and reality, and so they forged on with their inquiries to the metaphysical question of the unifying explanatory principle of the world. J.M.C G Lynn and P. Farelly in the book. A metaphysics of Being and God say:

If we look beyond the various formulations of his basic and primary question are note that each of these thinkers was searching in his own way for that which makes our world and universe, “one world” and “one Universe” – infact, each was asking in this own way what is being?²

From the above citation, these thinkers were concern with what it is that is in things that make them have existence. Parmenides of Elea is the first to articulate the concept of being in more distinct way by maintaining that being “is”. For him, this accurately encompasses the whole reality. Being is one, non-being “is not”, becoming is an illusion, being is eternal and unchanging. Being came to be, it must have been originated from the state of being rather than non-being. Non-being is a condition for nothingness and nothingness can produce nothing. Parmenides went on to say that being can be spoken of and it can be an object of thought. Being is complete, one reality which cannot be added or divided, if it is not one but divided then it must be divided by something rather than itself. But it cannot be divided by some other things outside itself, for besides being, there is nothing. Similarly, it is immovable and continuous.

Plato is another prominent philosopher of this epoch who follows Parmenides in his line of though that “being” is eternal but differs slightly

Peter Z. Alawa

from him. For Plato, reality does not exist here but exists in the world of forms. Plato confirms this in the “Phaedo” when he says:

The absolute reality remains concrete but what appears as the concrete instances of thing always admits of variation that observation by means of eyes and ears and all other senses are actively deceptive and that philosophers should attribute no truth to anything subject to variation³.

For Plato the primary task of philosophers is to investigate the part of the world that gives us the reality as contrasted with mere appearance. For Aristotle being is here and concretely in the world, we can see it, and it can transcend it self. Aristotle sees the object of metaphysics as being qua being also describes being as the foundation of all things. He goes further to identify it with God. Walter Kaufmann commenting on Aristotle’s metaphysics says:

In Aristotle’s book metaphysics (vii, 1026 a 33) he argues that there are several senses in which a thing may be said to “be”. The expressions are as follows: being per accident, being as true, being per categories, being as act and potency, on the way to substance, privation of substantial forms, being that has no existence outside the intellect, being of finished but dependent existence, being of movement, generation and corruption⁴.

For Aristotle, being can be expressed in several ways, as we have seen above. Aristotle’s idea of being gives meaning to change unlike Parmenides being which does not give room for change. Aristotle talks about material and immaterial substance. For him material substance changes while immaterial substance does not change.

For Plotinus, being is the “One” and after the “One”, there is nothingness. The philosophy of Plotinus tends to dissolve into mysticism. Plotinus follows Plato who certainly held that the form alone is real while not actually denying the existence of ordinary objects. However, differ from Plato in his use of the term of “One” Rex Warner in his book, The Greek Philosophers says:

The one is all things, and yet no one of all. For the principle of all is that not all things, but the one is all; because all things run as it were into it or rather do not yet exist, but will be⁵.

From the above citation, we can understand that the “One” is simple, and in it no variety. Hence, in order that being might exist, the “one is not being but being is under the “one” that is the progeny of it and as it were its from. Hence, being in the same manner as the “One” produces things similar to itself through an effusion of abundant power. Plotinus also said below the “one is being, mind and the soul.

The Problem of Being in Hegel

In summary, the pre-Socratics were asking what is it that is in thing that makes them have existence, more distinct way was Parmenides. In the ancient period Plato takes about being in dual ways, Aristotle believes that there are several ways we can talk of being. For Plotinus the “One” is the all and all for him. To the medieval period we turn.

Medieval period

St. Thomas Aquinas follows Aristotle in identifying “being” as being but maintains that “God is Being” par excellence while creatures are being in analogical senses⁶. Reflecting on Aristotle’s argument that various meanings of truth are predicated upon different senses of being. Aquinas relates the notion of being to the good to the extent that is the nature of what is desirable.

Similarly the true has relationship to knowledge on a account of its relationship to being. Thomas Aquinas in his book the Summa Theologica, says: “Everything is knowable in so far as it has being”⁷ For Aquinas, the highest being must be the highest truth, both in the intellect and his Being. John Scotus, on his own maintained that being is but contrary to Aquinas, Scotus insist that creatures are ‘being’ in the predicative sense of the word and not in analogical sense as posited by Aquinas. Scotus says being can be ascribed both to God and creatures. Therefore, being is univocal for scouts and not analogical scouts affirms this when he says:

Hence to all “being” is univocal” and so it is... in regard to the primary intelligible, that is, to the qualitative concepts of the genera “Species” individuals and all their essential parts, and to the uncreated Being. It has a virtual primacy in regard to the intelligible elements included in the first intelligible; that is, in regard to the quality in a concept of the ultimate difference and proper attributes⁸.

John Duns Scotus believes that metaphysics is the science of the transcendental, which includes being co-extensive attributes as the one, true and good. He also talks about pure and unqualified perfection, God alone is said to be omnipotent and also good and men have wisdom, knowledge and will. He says the task of metaphysicians are to work out ways in which the various transcendental concepts entail one another. Scotus also adds that being is whatever is, whether it is spiritual or material in so far as it can be known by the intellect is being. To conclude, the medieval philosophers see God as the foundational of all things. Let use turn to the modern period.

Modern Period

The philosophers of this period are preoccupied with the problem of “substances” rather than the problem of “being” Rene Descartes concentrates

on the Cogito ergo sum (I think therefore I exist) Descartes makes a landmark because he reduces all reality to two basic substances. Material substance and spiritual substance. He defines matter as extension without thought and defines spirit as thought without extension and identifies men with a thinking subject. Descartes sees being as physical and spiritual. This can be found in The Meditations.

I think therefore I exist so assumed that all the extravagant suppositions of Skeptics cannot shake, it so it is not a syllogism but it is an intuition and understanding of nature⁹.

Descartes distinguishes between abstract and real principle. The “Cogito” is the first principle of existence and from it, we deduce all other existences. Spinoza goes beyond Descartes in understanding being in relation to substances. Spinoza echoes this in his book Short Treatise in God, Man and His Wellbeing thus: “I call substance that, which exists in itself and is convinced by itself”¹⁰ We can understand that the first part of the definition, Spinoza borrows from Aristotle and the other part is from himself.

Leibniz is dissatisfied with Descartes and Spinoza because of the way they described the nature of substance. He is of the view that they distorted the understanding of human nature, freedom and the nature of God. Spinoza’s monism is pantheism in which God is everything and everything is part of everything else. As Anthony Savile commenting on Leibniz in his book Leibniz and Monadology thus:

Leibniz accepted Spinoza’s theory of one substance thus was able to transcendence of god and the reality purpose and freedom on the universe. He accepted monads as the basic element in which all things are made. He denied the reality of matter and “being” but accepts that the whole universe is made up of immaterial things as monads, which do not interact but act on their own. There is no causality in the universe according to Leibniz¹¹.

Savile sees Leibniz to have gone beyond his predecessors by confirming that monads are the elements that all things consist of and that the monads could not interact with one another. He also denied the reality of matter. George Berkeley is an important philosopher in the modern period. He differs from all other empiricists when he confirms in his book Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge that:

“Esse est percipi aut percipere” to be is to be perceived or to perceive, in other words, to be “is either a perceive, a subject a mind (spirit) of an object of perception (an idea)”¹².

It is evident that there is no other substance than spirit or what which perceives for Berkeley. Kant comes to unify the empiricists and rationalists

The Problem of Being in Hegel

by saying that there is nothing that is in the interest that does not come from the senses. That both sense knowledge and innate ideas can come from the basic understanding of things Kant believes in created being and uncreated being Kant writes in his book Critique of Pure Reason Thus:

Being is evidently not a real predicate or a concept that can be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely on admission of a thing and of certain determinations in it. Logically, it is merely the copular of judgement¹³.

Kant sees “being” as a general concept that is not the same as particular being. For Kant being is an ontological characteristic that belongs to every being, actual and possible. For Marx, being is “matter” which is the opposite of the absolute spirit of Hegel, Fredrick Nietzsche opens a new ground in his thinking that being is the will to power the natural tendency of man to dominate the other. Strong races to dominate weak ones. According to Nietzsche in his book Beyond Good and Evil he writes: “... their “knowing is creating, their creating is a law-giving, their will to truth is-will to power”¹⁴.

In Nietzsche come the view that actual philosophers are commanders and the law givers whatever they say happens because they are strong. In the summary, the following understanding of being is relative to this period is multiple. Being for Rene Descartes moved him to subjectivism, for Spinoza pantheism, and that Leibniz the monads which are the basic elements in which all things are constituted, for Kant being is transcendental reality; for Nietzsche, being is now anthropological the will to power. To the contemporary period we turn.

In the contemporary period, the study of being came up with new vigor, Martin Heidegger is central among contemporary philosophers. He is called the philosopher of “Being” His career was to make us return to the proper meaning of Being. This is his contribution to philosophy. Heidegger’s understanding of Being moves from one stage to another. It is static, or a close system but dynamic. There are three stages in Heidegger’s understanding of Being, the first is Dasein analysis, the second is art and truth: A path to Being, and thirdly Being as a process – that is expressed as Ereignis (event). And then at this stage Being controls and human beings wait on “being” in silent mediation. Heidegger’s search of Being ends in a mystery. Mystery for Heidegger is not a religious mystery but that which human being can only approach the mystery of Being in humility. Heidegger confirms that Being is a mystery when he says in his book Discourse on Thinking (Gelassershiet) thus: “that which shows itself and at the same time withdraws is the essential trit of what we call mystery¹⁵. For Heidegger, Being is a mystery that which you cannot grasp-the full meaning but to contemplate in silent. For Heidegger the best language is silent.

Gabriel Marcel a catholic philosopher takes a mystical approach to the issue of being. He sees being as a mystery. Here he made a clear distinction

between a problem and a mystery. For him a problem is that which is before us whereas a mystery is that which involves us. For him a problem is that which is outside and before you; but a mystery is that which involves you it is part and parcel of you that which you cannot run away from it. The central point in his philosophy is the ontological mystery and inter-subjectivity. A mystery for Marcel is that which our existence is involved. Our encounter with being is by means of activity, and not abstractly involved. Marcel also confirms that we can also relate to other beings in his books. Metaphysical Journal that: "The more we affirm the being of others in the inter-subjectivity level the more we are"¹⁶.

For Marcel man is Homo viator (man on the way) and that each person is essentially an individual but he is insufficient in himself and must belong to a family for self fulfillment; by involving actively in the mystery of being. Jean-Paul Sartre, as an existential philosopher identifies being with whatever is. He refuses to take a mystical approach to the issue and denies that being has any hidden reality behind existing things. Being for Sartre is not a hidden reality in which objects participate. It is incorrect says Sartre; to say that objects possess being or that they participate in being. Whatever exists is a being Sartre goes on to say there are two kinds of being namely; being-for-itself (pour-soi) and being in itself (en-soi). The former is conscious being while the latter is unconscious. William Barrett in his book, Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy says:

...becoming says Sartre is divided into two fundamental kinds (1) Being-for-itself (2) Being-in-itself. Being in itself (en-soi) is the self contained being of a thing. A stone is a stone; it is what it is, no less, no more, the being of the thing always coincides with itself. Being-for-itself (pour-soi) is the extensive with the realm of consciousness, the nature of consciousness that is perpetually beyond itself... Human existence is thus a personal self-transcendence; in existence we are always beyond ourselves¹⁷.

To explain Sartre better we should know that he is an atheist, he also rejected the position of Aristotle and Kant (the idea of act and potency). He believes that act is everything. The act of being is everything that a being is, besides the act there is no potency. For Sartre being manifests itself exactly as it is and it does this without any intermediary. He believes that objects themselves are being they neither point to nor they reveal being as a reality distinct from themselves. Sartre speaks for himself in his book, Being and Nothingness thus:

The object does not possess being⁷ and its existence is not a participation in being, nor any kind of relation. It is that the "It" only way to define its manner of being¹⁸.

The Problem of Being in Hegel

Necessity concerns the connection between ideal propositions but not that of existence. An existing phenomenon can never be derived from another existent qua existent.

P.F. Strawson's own contribution about the study of being is remarkably similar to the things we now want to interpret about Aristotle, which is based on substance. Like Aristotle, Strawson's concern is to analyze the most conditions, which exist in order for us to be able to refer, to identify, name and talk about particular things. Like Aristotle, Strawson believe in substance, the main difference between Strawson and Aristotle is that matter is the individuating factor which differentiates one individual from another of the same kind and a real individual from an imaginary one of the same kind. But for Strawson the individuating factor for us is that of space and time.

In summary, contemporary philosophers see "being as whatever "is", others take it as a mystical reality, which is imminent and transcendent, and which is the source of all reality. Also others said we can relate to people by the way of inter-subjectivity.

In African philosophy there is also the believe in the existence and reality of being. However there are a variety of opinions in this regard. Being for some is that which other contingent being participate in; while the supreme Being governs the theorcratic universe.

Being is also eternal and unchangeable. In a research into the ontological, historical and cultural philosophical world of Bantu people of the East Central Africa in relation to the notion of being. Placid Temples write in his book Bantu Philosophy thus:

In Bantu ontology, the concept of "force is bound to the concept of "being". Being is that which possesses force. Force is the nature of being. Force is being and being is force¹⁹.

According to Temples, force here is understood as life, energy, strength, power, dynamism or what temples technically refers to as vital (vital force). The highest "force vital" is God himself the creator of all, vital par excellence. The Yoruba's of the Western part of Nigeria are not different in their conception and hierarchy of beings from those of other traditional societies; when E.B. Idowu says:

First in the hierarchy of existence is the "supreme being" Olorun, after him the ancestors who are acting as intermediaries. Most powerful of them is Olimila²⁰.

For Idowu he believes in the gradation of beings in African societies but among the Yoruba's, the most powerful and strongest is the Orumila. In conclusion, the African concept of person is not different from the western world, especially with the ontological definition. Both recognizes the physical and spiritual as well as the metaphysical components of man. The general African belief concerning man is that he is made up of material and

Peter Z. Alawa

immaterial substances. By extension, man's life is a cycle of birth, puberty, marriage, procreation, death and after life. He would not stay in one stage forever, he must move on to the next stage, considered to be the seat of the Supreme Being. To being and non being in Hegel we turn.

BEING AND NON-BEING IN HEGEL

Generally speaking we can say that the problem Kant resolved in epistemology by unifying rationalism and empiricism; is what Hegel is doing here in metaphysics. Hegel beings by postulating a spiritual principle or substance he calls idea-in itself, dynamic and self-creative. When it externalizes itself in space he calls nature. When nature evolves to the level of self-consciousness, it is called spirit. This constitutes the Hegelian triad of idea, nature and spirit, which evolves dialectically as thesis-antithesis and synthesis. The synthesis forms a new thesis for further development. The evolution of spirit in time, Hegel calls history-which he defines as the "autobiography of God". History is the process of divine self-liberation towards absolute freedom, which Hegel says is at different stages of realization in this world. Hegel confirms this in work Philosophy of History when he says:

The time must eventually come for understanding that rich product of active reason, which history of the world offers us. It was for a while the fashion to profess admiration for the wisdom of god is displaying in nature (animals, plants and isolated occurrences). But if it will be allowed that providence manifests itself in such objects and forms of existence, why not also in universal history. Derive wisdom is one and the same in the great as in the little, and we must not imagine God to be too weak to exercise his wisdom on the general scale²¹.

With Hegel, god manifests Himself in history; God is the same in the great and the small. Hegel contrasted being with non-being as thesis and antithesis. Thus Hegel's dialectics, 'being' is thesis while non-being is the antithesis. The resultant synthesis is becoming. In other words, in the Hegelian dialectic, being and non-being are "moments" in the process of becoming. To non-being we turn.

Non being

The question I may ask is, is there any way you can use nothing as a positive answer? Yes. For example, your mother asks you, did you see any cup at the door as you were coming in. If you did not see it you will say nothing mama. This is positive answer.

The Problem of Being in Hegel

In more practical sense we do not articulate what is not being. It is what is “being” we can have knowledge of Sciences investigate beings and not nothing “Non being” is the opposite of being. Parmenides says “Nonbeing” is a condition of nothingness and nothingness can produce nothing. The above statement of Parmenides is the problem caused in the history of philosophy.

In another perspective, Hegel says man has neglected “nothing” throughout the history of ontology. The total neglect of nothing would appear to be legitimized by the fact that “Nothing” is not anything that is. However, an ontological dilemma stares us nakedly in the face. On the one hand, how can we articulate “nothing” since it is not anything that is? On the other hand, how can we refuse to articulate what is even presupposed by such a refusal? Heidegger supporting Hegel on non-being says: nothing is the absolutely fundamental phenomenon of philosophical research, nothing is the unthought element of thought. Nothing is the ground of all nullity. Martin Heidegger has much detail to say in this aspect of nothing as he comments on nonbeing in Hegel.

Classical metaphysics conceive “Nothing” as signifying not being that is to say, unformed matter which is powerless to form itself into “being” and cannot therefore present an appearance... what has “being is the self-creating... product... which presents itself as such as an image... the origin, law and limits of this ontological concept are discussed as little as nothing itself¹².

Understanding Heidegger here it means that metaphysics deals with beings and conceive nothing as nonbeing. It means that nonbeing is unformed maker-powerless to form itself into “being”. In conclusion, we agree with Heidegger that nothing means nonbeing and it is this “nonbeing” which is opposite of being that Hegel tries to resolve the problem by saying in being there is non-being.

The idea of which Hegel speaks is deduced in his logic by the same method that yielded becoming out of being. The category of subjectivity is deduced from objectivity. That is the notion of subjectivity already contains the idea of objectivity. To say I am a self (subjectivity) implies that there is not self (objectivity): subjectivity consists of thought in its formal sense. Objectivity, on the other hand, is thought that is, as it where, outside itself and in thing. What Hegel is saying is that the subjective (formal) and the objective (material) are brought together in unity. For Hegel there is nonbeing in being.

CONCLUSION

We have come to the end of “The problem of being in Hegel,” the problem of being is one of the fundamental problems of philosophy. Today the person whose entire career is to uncover the real meaning of Being is Heidegger but he did not resolve the problem because his search of “Being” ends in a

mystery. The person who attempted to resolved the problem is Hegel who says there is nonbeing in being. In my own view the better understanding of being is that there is more to existence than the concrete material things one can see and touch. It means that beyond animality there is spirituality that which one cannot see or touch is non-being. The Christians even believe in vanity, vanity upon vanity is vanity but beyond vanity is eternity. "Eternity" is the absent of before and after which remains ever present or continuous now. Indeed Hegel says subjectivity and objectivity are brought together in unity. It means in objectivity there is subjectivity.

REFERENCES

- Heidegger, Martin (1961). *An Introduction to Metaphysics* translated by Raphy Manheim (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday and Company in, P.45.
- Glynn, J. Mc and P. Farely (1966). *A Metaphysics of Being and God*. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Publishers, P. 361.
- Makeon, Richard (1973). *The Trail and Death of Socrates* Translated by (Chicago: The University Press, P. 309.
- Kaufmann Walter (1961). *Philosophic Classics Thales-Ockam* Second Edition (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc, p. 338.
- Warner, Rex (1958). *The Greek Philosophers* (New York: A Mentor Book, P. 221.
- Pegis, Anton C. (1948). *Thomas Aquinas. The Summa Theologica*, New York: The Modern Library, P. 783.
- Scotus, John Duns (1965). *The Philosophical Eritings* Transalted by Allan Wolter (Chicago: The Liberal Art Press Inc. P. 5-6.
- Descartes, Rene I. (1901). *The Mediations* Translated by John Vench (New York Image Books, P. 2.
- Baruch, Spinoza (1953). *Short Treatise on God, man and is Wellbeing* (New York: Beacon Press, P.3.
- Savile, Anthony (2000). *Leibniz and Monadology* (London: Philosophical Books P. 91.
- Berkely, George (1985). *Treatise Concerning Principles of Human Knowledge* (New York Penguin Books, P. 68.
- Kant, Immanuel (1966). *Critique of Pure Reason* (New Anchor Book, P. 627.
- Nietzsche, Fredrick (1973). *Beyond God and Evil* (New York: Pengiun Books, P. 142-143.
- Heidegger, Martin (1966). *Discourse on Thinking (Gelassenheit)* Translated by John Anderson and Hans Freund (New York and London: Harper & Row Publishers, P.55.
- Marcel, Gabriel (1952). *Metaphysical Journal* (Chicago: Henrj Regnery Publication, P. 317.

The Problem of Being in Hegel

- Barrett, William (1962). *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, P. 245.
- Same, Jean-Paul (1956). *Being Nothingness* (New York: Methuen and Co. Ltd, P.xxv in Omoregbe. P. 88.
- Temples, Placid (1959). *Bantu Philosophy* (London: Kegan Paul Publishers, P. 36.
- Idowu, E.B. (1973). *African Traditional Religion* (London: SCM Press Ltd, P. 168.
- Hegel, W.F. (1956). *Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, P. 15.
- Heidegger, Martin (1956). *Existence and Being* (London: Vision Press Ltd, P. 345.