

The question of **being** (Greek, *τό ὄν*, the present participle of the verb *εἶναι*, "to be"; Latin, *esse*; German, *Sein*; French, *être*), in philosophy, has been a central topic of metaphysics; the study of "being" is called ontology.<sup>[1]</sup>

Philosophers often suppose a certain sense of being as primary, and from it derive other senses of being as secondary. So, even if they use the same word "is," the meaning of being is different, depending upon what it is that "is": sensible material beings, values and norms, principles, mathematical objects, quality, time, space, God, etc. For Plato the primary kind of being is the immutable world of ideas, while for Aristotle it is the mutable world of substances. In another context, however, Aristotle put one immutable substance, God, as the principle of all being, and Thomas Aquinas, too, conceived God as the primary being, from which all other beings in the world receive their existence. Materialists conceive material or a sensible entity as the primary model of being, while idealists regard thought or spirit as primary. Most philosophers, including Aristotle, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, were aware of these diverse senses of being.

Inquiries into being often contrast it with its reciprocal concept, and the meaning of being varies accordingly. Paired sets include: being and becoming, being and non-being, being and appearance or phenomena, being and existence, being and essence, being and beings, being and thought, and being and ought.

How to approach the question of being is determined by the style of thought, philosophical approach, or methodology. For example, the phenomenological approaches of Husserl and Heidegger locate the question of being on the horizon of human consciousness and existence. Eastern philosophies emphasize the role of "non-being" for our understanding of being.

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Many philosophical and religious traditions seem to agree that elucidating the nature of being discloses a fundamental distinction between an essential world and a resultant world of phenomena. They also seem to agree that each of the two worlds has diversity within itself with some kind of purposiveness. Yet they give different answers to the question of which of the two worlds is more real.

## A History of the Notion of Being in the West

### The pre-Socratic question of being

The pre-Socratic Greeks had a more direct, non-conceptual, and non-objectifying approach to the question of "being," as compared with the rather indirect approach of Plato and Aristotle that attempted to conceptualize and objectify "being" through instantiated forms or formed matter.

For the pre-Socratics, the most important question to be answered was: What is the world made of? In answering this question, they were immediately convinced that all things in the world are identical in nature with one another. Hence, they successively attempted to reduce the world in general to water (Thales), then to air (Anaximenes), then to fire (Heraclitus), until Parmenides finally said that the whole world is made of "being" (*to on*, the present participle of the verb *einai*, "to be.") Parmenides' answer was more persuasive because while it was not at once evident that water, air, and fire are completely identical, it was undeniable that they all have in common the property of being, because they all *are*. Being, then, was considered to be the fundamental and ultimate element of all that is.

What, then, is "being"? It turned out to be a difficult question to answer indeed. The question of what water, air, or fire is, looked much easier because the definition of any of these was quite self-evident. So, Parmenides did not discuss what being is, but instead highlighted the fact of being as the truth and characterized being as one, all-inclusive, whole, unborn, timeless, immobile, immutable, permanent, and imperishable. His dictum: That which is, is, while that which is not, i.e., "non-being" (*to me on*), is not: "The one way, assuming that being is and that it is impossible for it not to be, is the trustworthy path, for truth attends it. The other, that not-being is and that it necessarily is, I call a wholly incredible course, since thou canst not recognise not-being (for this is impossible), nor couldst thou speak of it."<sup>[2]</sup> Thus, any individual things that look mutable and perishable in the world are our illusory perceptions, and they do not belong to the realm of being.

Usually contrasted with Parmenides' notion of being as the ultimate principle that is immutable and eternal, is Heraclitus' understanding of fire as the ultimate element of reality, according to which the whole of reality is mutable and transitory like fire. For Heraclitus, everything is in flux and becoming, and immutability or stability is illusory. Perhaps the only sense in which he was able to talk about true being was this unchanging principle of transitory passage and its cyclicity.

### Plato and Aristotle

Plato differentiated between the immutable world of ideas or forms and the transitory world, saying that the former is an eternal, incorporeal realm of ideas and values that are true beings, while the latter is a less real, ephemeral, "shadowy" world of material things that are far from true beings and subject to change and decay. This way, Plato struck a compromise between Parmenides' notion of being and Heraclitus' theory of becoming, although for Plato the world of

ideas is more important than the transitory world. Both are linked through the participation of the latter in the former, and the latter's degree of reality is determined by how much material things partake and manifest ideas which are true reality. The latter world, while being thus differentiated from the former, is also differentiated from the realm of non-being that is unformed matter; it constitutes an intermediate stage of becoming between being and non-being. Plato treated all this in his *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Statesman*.

For Aristotle, the science of "being qua being" (*on hēi on*) was what he called "first philosophy," as is discussed in his *Metaphysics*.<sup>[3]</sup> but his understanding of being was quite different from Plato's. For Aristotle, only individual things, called substances, are fully beings, while other things such as quantity, quality, relation, place, and time, called categories, have a derivative kind of being, dependent on individual substances. Thus, all senses of being are derived from a single central notion, the notion of "substance" (*ousia*, the feminine genitive of *to on*, which in turn is the present participle of the verb *einai*, "to be"). According to him, however, whereas each individual

substance is a mutable thing composite of two correlative principles: form and matter, or, in more general terms, actuality and potentiality, there is one immutable substance, God, who is pure form devoid of matter. God as the highest genus of substance is therefore the principle of all being and dealt with also in first philosophy.

## Medieval philosophers

Medieval philosophy basically followed the Aristotelian understanding of the various senses of being in reality, although the Latin equivalent to the Greek *to on* is *ens* ("being"), the present participle of *sum* ("I am"). *Esse* ("to be") is the present infinitive. Another related term is *essentia* ("essence"), an abstract form of the present participle of *esse*, referring to what a substance (*substantia*) is in itself.

One new development in Medieval philosophy was the distinctive notion of *existentia* ("existence," from the verb *existere*, which means to "to exist," "to appear," or "to emerge"). Greek ontology apparently did not have it, since its primary focus was the matter of predication based on copula sentences of the form "X is Y." The best Aristotle came up with based on the primarily predicative verb *einai* was the distinction between *hoti esti* ("that it is") and *ti esti* ("what it is"), which could mean "existence" and "essence," respectively. Medieval philosophy, however, developed the notion of existence distinctively under the influence of Islamic philosophy, which distinguished existence (*wujud*) from essence (*mahiat*) in light of a biblical metaphysics of creation within Islam which differentiated the contingent existence of the created world from the necessary status of God. Thomas Aquinas adopted this, maintaining that the essence and existence of each and every contingent, finite creature are distinct, while essence and existence are identical within God, who is therefore preeminent over the world. Thus, even when rejecting Anselm's ontological proof for God's existence that had argued that to know what God is (his essence) is to know that God exists (his existence), Aquinas did not reject the identification of God's essence and God's existence.

Interestingly, according to Aquinas, because of his preeminent status over the world, God is now "the first being" (*primum ens*), and each and every individual creature is a "participated being" (*ens per participationem*) which derives its being from God as the first being.<sup>[4]</sup> Thus, although God and creatures are not totally similar, they are at least proportionately similar, i.e., analogical in their relationship through the "analogy of being" (*analogia entis*). Duns Scotus, however, denied this, suggesting the univocity of being, although he still recognized that God as *ens a se* ("being from itself") and creatures as *entia ab alio* ("beings derived from another") are two different aspects of being.

## Modern philosophers

Empiricists and materialists in modern philosophy such as Thomas Hobbes took a sensible material thing as the model of being and identified sensibility or physicality as the primary sense of being. This perspective of being has been dominant throughout modern times.

At the same time, there were also rationalists and idealists who did not agree with empiricists and materialists. Baruch Spinoza, a rationalist with his pantheistic recognition of only one "substance" (God or Nature, *Deus sive Natura*), regarded this "substance" (*substantia*) as the primary sense of being and referred to "mode" (*modus*) as the derivative sense of being, ontologically and conceptually derivative from the former. For substance is "that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself," while mode is "the modifications of substance, or that which exists in, and conceived through, something other than itself."<sup>[5]</sup> Thus, substance and mode are two main senses of being, although Spinoza suggested that being itself has, in the strict sense, no proper definition.

For absolute idealist Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "being" coincides with "thought," because the subject matter of philosophy is the life of the Absolute Spirit, self-thinking Thought, as manifested panentheistically in the universe. The Absolute Spirit manifests itself in the universe by going out of itself and returning to itself. This life of the Absolute Spirit has three main phases: itself, nature, and the human spirit; and they are dealt with by logic, the philosophy of nature, and the philosophy of spirit, respectively. Thus, logic deals with how the Absolute Spirit conceives of itself before the creation of the universe. Logic begins with "being" (*Sein*), which is the most immediate and indeterminate concept the Absolute Spirit can formulate about itself. But, being is so completely indeterminate that it passes over into "non-being" or "nothing" (*Nichts*), its negation, which is also completely indeterminate. Non-being also easily moves back to being. So, a third category, "becoming" (*Werden*), is posited, which is the synthesis, at a higher level, of being as thesis and non-being as antithesis. While being and non-being are wholly indeterminate abstractions, becoming is "the first concrete thought,"<sup>[6]</sup> thus being able to become "determinate being" (*Dasein*), which is a definite being. Although notions such as being "in itself" (*an sich*), being "for itself" (*für sich*), and being "in and for itself" (*an und für sich*) are also developed from determinate being, the original dialectic of being, non-being, and becoming is the starting point of the whole dialectic life of the Absolute Spirit that involves all other senses of being through the triads of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis at various phases and sub-phases.

## Husserl and Heidegger

In the late nineteenth century, Edmund Husserl recognized that various kinds of being such as normative beings, values, space, time, mathematical objects, logical objects, historical object, and others do exist in different senses. Husserl gained this insight probably from his teacher Franz Brentano who had elaborated it in his *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle*. Husserl, thus, developed phenomenology as a philosophical methodology which can describe multiple senses of being as the world of the "transcendental ego" or "pure consciousness." For example, in describing in which sense "time" exists, Husserl inquired into how time presents itself to us and developed a phenomenology of time.<sup>[7]</sup> Similarly, for all kinds of objects, Husserl inquired into how each of them presents its sense of being to human subjects. Although Husserl did not finish this project, he at least laid the foundation of its philosophical methodology.

Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, took the question of being (ontology) as the primary subject of philosophy. Heidegger complained that the question of being has failed to be answered in the long philosophical tradition in the West because since Plato and Aristotle the notion of being has always been conceptualized and objectified through instantiated forms or formed matter. He, however, appreciated pre-Socratics' approach to the direct disclosure (*aletheia* in Greek) of being, and suggested that for this kind of direct disclosure of "being" (*Sein*), the human being should be thrown to the phenomenal world of "beings" (*Seiendes*) as *Dasein* (literally "being-there"). By being confronted with "non-being" (*Nichts*) there, the human being experiences dread about death (the negation of being) and grasps the meaning of being in beings. His methodology of inquiring into the meaning of being is called hermeneutic phenomenology, resulting from a combination of phenomenology and hermeneutics. In his inquiry into the meaning of being, Heidegger explicated the roles of death and conscience, teleological interdependence of being, and other unique elements. For Heidegger, the word "existence" (*Existenz*) is simply synonymous with *Dasein*: "The 'essence' of *Dasein* lies in its existence."<sup>[8]</sup>

Existentialists such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre inquired into unique modes of being of human beings, and explored complex elements involved in human existence, which includes freedom, authenticity/inauthenticity, anxiety, commitment, death, good and evil, faith, fate, and others. For existentialists, the meaning of being is intertwined with axiological and aesthetic elements.

## The Notion of Being in Non-Western Traditions

### The Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew equivalent to the English word "to be" is *hayah*. But, it is hardly used as predicative or as existential. For the predicative purpose, the so-called noun clause is used without copula most likely; and for the existential purpose, the particle *yēš* ("there is"), which is no longer a verb, is used most likely. Therefore, in most cases the verb *hayah* means "to come to be" or "to come to pass." This does not mean that this verb is equivalent to the English verb "to become." So, for example, "the earth was waste" (Genesis 1:2), where *hayahis*, the past tense of *hayah*, is used, actually does not mean to equate "the earth" and "waste," but to show that "the earth came to be waste," if not that "the earth became waste." It is interesting to observe that the Hebrew verb *hayah* shows an act more dynamic than the English verb "to be."

## Eastern philosophies

Eastern philosophies, while having the notion of "being" like Western thought does, have tended to recognize the notion of "non-being" more than Western thought does. Hinduism distinguishes between being (*sat*) and non-being (*asat*), equating the former with the enduring reality of *Brahman*, the supreme cosmic power, and the latter with the illusory unreality of the manifested universe. Hinduism, however, has another, diametrically opposed use of these terms especially in its mysticism, where non-being (*asat*) means that boundless and eternal metaphysical expanse of void even beyond *Brahman* and the universe because of which even being (*sat*) itself is and endures.

Buddhism accepts the Buddha's teaching that everything in the world is marked by three main characteristics: 1) "impermanence" (*anitya* in Sanskrit; *anicca* in Pali), which not only means that everything will eventually cease to exist, but also that everything is in flux; 2) "unsatisfactoriness" (*duhkha* in Sanskrit; *dukkha* in Pali), which means that nothing in the world can bring lasting satisfaction; and 3) "non-self" (*anatman* in Sanskrit; *anatta* in Pali), which rejects the Hindu notion of "self" (*atman*). Mahayana Buddhism extends the third characteristic of "non-self" from sentient beings to all kinds of objects in the world. The three characteristics as a whole, therefore, mean that nothing in the world possesses permanent, essential identity, and also that all things, in that regard, are dependent on each other (*pratityasamutpada* in Sanskrit, meaning "dependent origination"). For Mahayana Buddhism, this means a virtual rejection of the metaphysical notion of being itself or "own-being" (*svabhava* in Sanskrit). A doctrine of "emptiness" (*sunyata* from the Sanskrit adjective *sunya*, meaning "empty"), therefore, has been developed to show this insight into reality, so we may be led to a realm of wisdom and inner peace where we acquire the Buddha-nature (*Buddha-dhatu* in Sanskrit).

According to Taoism, *Tao* ("Way") is the primordial state of oneness which unites various things in the world that emerge from it. Lao Tzu often referred to the pair of "being" (*yu*) and "non-being" (*wu*), saying that both are contained within *Tao*. Neo-Daoist Wang Bi of the third century C.E., however, identified *Tao* with non-being and believed it to be the background of the world of being.

## Multiple Senses of Being in a Paired Set of Concepts

As has been noticed above, being can often be paired with another concept and the sense of being differs according to what it is paired with. The pairs listed below are some of those often discussed in the history of philosophy. These pairs, however, often overlap and they are not mutually exclusive.

### Being and becoming

Being, when it is contrasted with becoming, means immutability, permanence, or constant. Parmenides considered being to be the first principle of reality, believing that only being is, and that non-being is not. Also, everything is one, and the one is being, which is continuous, all-inclusive, and eternal. For him, becoming is illusory and impossible. By contrast, Heraclitus regarded becoming as the first principle, maintaining that everything is in a state of flux. Plato is considered to have reconciled between being and becoming by integrating the immutable world of ideas and the transitory world of material things through the notion of participation.

### Being and non-being

Being means immutable, actual existence, while non-being refers to non-existence, according to Parmenides. However, the contrast between being and non-being has been interpreted in various ways. For Plato, being refers to the immutable world of ideas (forms), while non-being is unformed matter; and these two are united to constitute the transient world of becoming. Hinduism often equates being with the enduring reality of *Brahman*, and non-being with the illusory unreality of the manifested universe. Mahayana Buddhism denies being in favor of non-being for our enlightenment. For Hegel, being and non-being are two opposing, completely indeterminate logical (and also ontological) categories, which however are integrated into a **third category** of becoming at a higher and determinate level. For Heidegger, being and non-being are no longer indeterminate categories, and non-being is instrumental for our grasp of the meaning of being.

### Being and phenomena

Being, when it is contrasted with phenomena, means true reality in contrast to mere appearances or what appears to sense perception. Plato inquired into the true reality of being in contrast to what appears to our five senses. For Plato, the true reality of being has permanent, immutable ideas, which intellect alone can grasp. Things are beautiful, for example, by virtue of the idea of beauty which is true reality. What appears to our five senses is a less real, ephemeral appearance.

### Being and existence

*Main article: Being and Existence*

Being and existence are related and somewhat overlapping with respect to their meanings. Being means being in general, covering all senses of being, while existence usually represents only one sense of being, which means the actual being of the world of phenomena. In the Middle Ages, under the influence of Islamic philosophy that recognized the contingency of the created world as compared with God the creator, Scholastic philosophy used the Latin word "existere" ("to exist" or "to appear") as distinct from "esse" ("to be"), and from "essentia" ("essence"), an abstract form of the present participle of "esse." Hence the distinction of existence from being, and also from essence.

### Being (existence) and essence

Being, when it is contrasted with essence, means actual existence, which is one sense of being. Actual existence means that a being exists, while its essence means that which makes what it is. Medieval theologians such as Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas argued that God is a unique being whose essence is its existence, while essence and existence are separable for all beings other than God. The biblical concept of God as "I am who I am" expresses the identity of essence and existence in God.

### Being and beings

Being, when it is contrasted with beings, means existence in the sense of event or fact of to-be. Being means the fact of existence itself, while beings mean particular entities that exist. Heidegger, for example, stressed this distinction between being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiendes*) in order to highlight the concept of being or to-be as a dynamic activity. In a different context, Medieval theologians

distinguished between God as "being from itself" (*ens a se*) and particular creatures as "beings derived from another" (*entia ab alio*).

## Being and thought

Being, when it is contrasted with thought, means the objective reality that is outside of the cognitive subject. Thought refers to ideas in the mind; and being refers to spatio-temporal, extra-mental existence. This contrast was used by modern philosophers who had an epistemological concern. The contrast of being and thought appeared within the question of how ideas or thoughts *in* the mind can be a real representation of the objective reality which exists *outside* of the mind. For idealists such as Hegel, thought and being are the same.

## Is (being) and ought

Being or "is," when it is contrasted with "ought," means factuality in contrast to normativeness. Immanuel Kant, for example, distinguished prescriptive statements in morality, which use "ought" or "should" (*sollen*), in contrast to natural, descriptive statements which describe what things factually "are" (*sein*).

## Remark

It is clear that the multiple sense of being has been almost universally recognized both in East and West perhaps with the exception of actualism in analytic philosophy. The distinction between an essential type of world and a phenomenal world is the most basic distinction, and a deity or ultimate being usually belongs to the former. The question of which of the two worlds is more real than the other is answered differently by different philosophical and religious schools, and even when the answer is that the phenomenal world is more real, the real status of a deity or ultimate being is far from questioned (as in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas). The essential type of world is further subdivided into a variety of entities such as Plato's ideas and Aristotle's categories. The phenomenal world is also subdivided into various beings ranging from spiritual entities like angels through humans to non-rational beings such as nonhuman animals, plants, and minerals.

There are at least two issues that attract our attention here. First, what sense can we make out of the basic distinction between an essential world and a phenomenal world? Second, what does the existence of various beings in the phenomenal world mean? The first issue seems to show that the world of phenomena is, after all, a manifestation, appearance, expression, unconcealment, creation, or emanation of the essential world that includes a deity or ultimate being. The second issue on various beings in the phenomenal world has often been treated in terms of what is called the "great chain of being" with God as its top,<sup>[9]</sup> and especially in the West it has usually been taken to mean that a world full of all possible beings is aesthetically more perfect than otherwise, and that God made such a world to show his perfection. Hence, while the first issue shows the act or movement of manifestation, the second one seems to show purposiveness in that act or movement. Pope John Paul II's call for a renewed "philosophy of being" based on both faith and reason in his 1998 Encyclical Letter, *Fides et Ratio*, if from a Catholic perspective, is perhaps a reminder of these points among others.<sup>[10]</sup>

## See also

- Being and existence
- Cogito ergo sum
- Meaning of life
- Metaphysics
- Ontology
- Indian philosophy
- Chinese philosophy

## Notes

1. Ontology is generally a central part of metaphysics. While some philosophers use metaphysics and ontology interchangeably, some make a sharp distinction. For example, Martin Heidegger distinguished between his "fundamental ontology" and metaphysics. During and after modern philosophy, metaphysics was used by many in the pejorative sense. (See the preface of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* for a description of the intellectual climate of his time.) Metaphysics generally covers a broad range of topics including questions of being, existence, becoming, essence, the first principles, freedom, the relationship between mind and matter, and others. For Kant, ontology is a part of a metaphysics, that he called "general metaphysics." Thus, while ontology is traditionally the central aspect of metaphysics, some contemporary thinkers such as Heidegger refused traditional metaphysics while developing an ontology.
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3. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book IV, part 2. (<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.4.iv.html>) *MIT Classics*. Retrieved August 1, 2008.
4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, part I, question 3, article 4. (<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1003.htm>) 1920, rev. ed. *newadvent.org*. Retrieved August 1, 2008.
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6. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Hegel's Logic: Being Part One of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. William Wallace. (Oxford University Press, 1975), 132.
7. Edmund Husserl's phenomenological studies of time resulted in his *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964).
8. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 67.
9. Arthur O. Lovejoy. *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Harvard University Press, 1976).
10. John Paul II, 1998, *Fides et Ratio*. ([http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_15101998\\_fides-et-ratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html)) *On the Relationship between Faith and Reason*. *Vatican Library*. Retrieved August 15, 2008.

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## External links

All links retrieved May 26, 2016.

- "The Vocabulary of Ontology: Being," (<http://www.formalontology.it/being.htm>) Ontology. A Resource Guide for Philosophers.
- "The Concept of Existence: History and Definitions by Leading Philosophers," (<http://www.formalontology.it/existence.htm>) Ontology. A Resource Guide for Philosophers.
- "Existence," (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existence/>) Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

## General Philosophy Sources

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/>)
- Paideia Project Online (<https://www.bu.edu/wcp/PaidArch.html>)
- The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>)
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