

# BEING AND BEYOND

by

Sripad Bhakti Madhava Puri Maharaja, Ph.D.



## Being in itself

Being is a peculiar concept since it seems to be associated with everything yet it is not any of those things itself. In other words, every thing *has* being - but being is not any of those things. To say that something “is” means that it has being. A tree is, the color red is, even a thought is

or has being, yet each of these things - a tree, a color, a thought - is different from being. They all *have* being, and certainly being cannot be taken away from any of them, yet they are not being itself. Therefore we can say that being is not any thing. We can't point to being the way we can point to a thing, and say “that is being.” Thus being is no thing, or nothing. Being is nothing! This is one way to arrive at that elusive identity. Being is associated with everything, but it is not any of those things itself.

Another way to think of the nature of being is to consider a specific thing like a sugar cube. If we take away all its sensuous properties, such as its sweetness, crystallinity, whiteness, etc. until we are left with only its being there, we cannot say what that *being* is. It is indeterminate. Even if we say that the underlying basis is a mass of matter, or a compound of Carbon, Hydrogen and Oxygen atoms does not avoid the fact that we consider that those things also *are* or have being. Yet being is not determined any further, or is indeterminate. The same indeterminacy that characterizes Being is indistinguishable from the indeterminacy of Nothing. This means that we have to go much further than mere being in order to understand what reality and truth actually are.

So far we have been referring only to being or pure being - being as such, or being in itself. Being-in-itself refers to implicit or undeveloped being. To simply say “being” does not tell us anything about being - what it is, or what it does. Therefore pure being holds implicitly or in-itself what it will become in its fully developed or explicated form. Being in itself or by itself has no other basis than itself. It is immediate or unmediated. It is not caused by anything. It merely is because it is. This is dark being, unknown and unknowable being, or being without any detailed explication. All detail, all development is lacking.

Such being is abstract, in the same way as a concept or thought. A thought has being or is, but not like a thing of the senses.

Although we attribute much substantiality to sensuous being yet we have discovered that being itself is not sensuously detectable. Being is not any quality or thing, while every quality or thing has being. In this sense being is not simply *a* thought like other thoughts since all thoughts *are* or have being. Thought itself is common to all thoughts just as being is common to all beings. Therefore being and thought both have this identical quality of all-pervasiveness or universality. Thought itself is the same abstraction as being in that it is present in every particular thought and yet is different from any particular thought. Thus thought and being are qualitatively indistinguishable or the same although we mean them to be different.

## Being for self



Hegel

Generally we think of being in itself and stop there. If we understand “what” a thing is that does not tell us the purpose or “what for” it is. In this sense “what for” means purpose or reason. Hegel states[1] that “Reason is purposive activity.” The fact that a thing is or has being does not address the reason or purpose for that being or what it is for. However,

this purpose is not to be understood as something external, but as intrinsic or essential to the nature of the being under consideration. From the perspective of its ultimate purpose or reason it is called the final cause.

Being and the cause of being are to be distinguished. It is in this sense that we are using the “what” and the “what for” of being. Both are necessary for a complete understanding. For example, a hand is a structure of bone and muscle. If a five-limbed structure like a hand were found in nature, however, we would not call it a hand. A hand has a particular function with respect to the body. It is not only a structure of bone and muscle. That is the “what” of the hand. The purpose or “what for” of the hand must also be known if we are to completely understand the full concept of hand. Thus being and being-for are both necessarily to be considered.

As regards being itself, the concept of being-for-itself means that there is a relationship involved and this means that there is also a division or sundered aspect. What is “for” another means that there must be one and another which is for it. The fact that the other is for the one, however, means that this division is overcome. What is for me is mine or my own. I take ownership of it or take it as part of myself. Violation of that part is violation of my-



self. Being for itself is thus the negation of being as other than itself. Yet the other as another to being is already the negation of being, i.e. not the original being. If we start with being we arrive at the other of being by negating it. This first negation of being produces the other as another. In order to arrive at being for itself, this other that is the negation of being must be negated. This is the second negation or the negation of the first negation. This negation of negation is therefore being-for-itself.

Being for itself is also infinite being. The infinite is that which has only itself outside of itself. If it has something other than itself outside of itself then it is finite, not infinite. Being-for-itself takes all being that is other than itself as its own self. In this way it is infinite. Being-for-itself may also mean the withdrawal into itself as a point, negating all other being outside itself. Thus it may also be finite.

Consciousness contains within itself the determination of being-for-self. The being of consciousness is tied to the content that is for it. In other words, consciousness is always consciousness of something as Husserl would say. What Husserl did not know is that this being-for-consciousness of the content or object is consciousness itself. This is what Hegel establishes in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In other words, consciousness presupposes its object as being independent of itself. This first positing of an object as being-in-itself is therefore actually a negation of consciousness or is literally consciousness itself as negated. The negation of this negation is then the being-for-itself of consciousness.

Another meaning of being-for-itself is the actualization or realization of being-in-itself or making explicit what is at first implicit. Being-in-itself as immediate or unmediated indicates that reasoning (or mediation) is still implicit. Therefore immediate being as being “for us” or “in itself” means the same thing. “For us” in this case means “for rational knowing.” Being-for-itself is the revelation or explication of the purpose or reason that is at first or immediately implicit. As explicit knowledge it is an object to knowing itself. In this sense it is the being-for-itself of knowing or reason.

In considering the “what for” of things, we must not make the mistake of thinking in terms of external reason. Hegel warns against this type of mistake by citing the example that one should not



**Cork**

consider cork trees to grow “for” making bottle stoppers. This is not the idea of cause that is implied in the ontological concept “being-for.” Rather than external cause one must think of internal cause. An example Aristotle gives is the hand. Without its function in relation to the body the mere shape and sub-

stance of a hand is not what we actually mean by hand. If a Martian comes to Earth and finds a clock, he may analyze it and recognize it as a mechanical arrangement of gears and springs but that will not be sufficient for him to understand that it is a device for telling time. In this way the “what” and the “what for”, or being and being-for are equally important for a complete comprehension of things.

### **Being-in-and-for-itself**

The purpose for which a thing exists is the reason for its being. Is it proper to distinguish being from its reason for being? Is being in itself really different from being for something, whether for itself or anything else? Let’s consider some examples.

When consciousness is aware of an object, and consciousness always means awareness of an object, the object takes on a divided significance: (1) it is the external object that consciousness confronts, i.e. the being in itself of the object that is independent of consciousness; (2) it is the object for consciousness, the appearance or the perception, i.e. the being for consciousness. If we represent this in abstract symbols we have C as consciousness, O as the object in (1), and C(O) as the consciousness of the object in (2). In ordinary consciousness we assume C(O) = O, but is this valid? Consciousness in contact with the object (in the immediate sense) becomes consciousness of the object (“becomes” indicates mediation or going from one thing to another). The immediate object is being in itself; the mediate object is being for consciousness. The question is whether consciousness of the object, C(O), is the same as the object, O.

There is a difference between appearance and what is appearing. This is the difference between being in itself (the thing that is appearing) and the appearance (being for consciousness). Kant called this the noumena and phenomena, respectively. Kant would say that the thing in itself could not be known. Knowing for Kant



**Immanuel Kant**

means only what is present for us within consciousness, i.e. being for consciousness. According to Kant, consciousness can only know being for itself, while being in itself is away and beyond consciousness. What this says is that the ordinary or naive acceptance of the identity between consciousness of an object and the object is not valid.

But the thing-in-itself outside of consciousness *is* known by consciousness, at least in so far as consciousness posits (thinks) it as being there outside of itself. Kant could not deny that this much is known or presumed. But how can consciousness know of a thing beyond consciousness if it is limited only to what is “for” consciousness? The conclusion can only be that the thing-in-

itself or being-in-itself is also a being-for-consciousness, or that the being-in-itself is actually a being-in-itself-for-consciousness. In this way consciousness has “taken up” the object into itself. What starts out as being considered an independent object confronting consciousness becomes something different within or for consciousness after further and more careful consideration. It must be understood that the proper relationship was always there but simply not comprehended. In this sense the whole ontological status of the object has dramatically changed by this new consideration. What started out as an object outside of or beyond consciousness has become an object of consciousness. In other words the object, O, has become C'(O) which is not really the same as the original C(O) that we first encountered. The first C(O) is the being for consciousness of an independent object beyond consciousness. The second C'(O) is the being-in-itself-of-the-object for-consciousness. The moment of being in itself is not lost. At the same time both C(O) and C'(O) are identical because C(O) is implicitly C'(O).

In knowing an object or thing-in-itself consciousness negates it as being independent of itself. Whatever is independent of consciousness is posited as being independent by consciousness. This is the conclusion. But the original immediacy of consciousness and the being-in-itself of the object are what we start with. We can start with the conclusion and deduce the beginning, or we can start with the beginning and arrive at the conclusion. We choose to start with immediate being confronting consciousness. The immediate means what we begin with. Mediation gives us the result or what we end with. A result implies that it is *arrived at* through a process. The process by which we arrive at a result is not to be discarded once the result is obtained. The whole movement from the first immediate beginning to the movement required to obtain the result is all to be retained. It is this wholeness that includes all the intervening steps that is the truth. Thus the concept is the whole process that starts from the immediacy of the beginning confrontation of consciousness and its object, to the movement of thinking from this moment of immediacy to the taking up of the object into consciousness and then accounting for all the moments and movements involved in this activity. This is actually what is occurring and thus this is genuine actuality.

Therefore Hegel states that the True is the whole. [2] Generally there is a tendency to want to get immediately to the result and once that is obtained to forget about everything else that went

into obtaining the result. The answer to a mathematical problem is not considered true until the whole calculation by which the result was obtained has been confirmed. Likewise the result and the whole process from the moment of the immediate beginning to all the intervening steps must be considered in expressing the Truth. The whole process is itself the Truth and not merely the statement of the result. Thus “Truth” as a simple statement does not include all that it actually is. “Actual” means act or action, and the activity of understanding or knowing the Truth and acting accordingly is what Truth “actually” is. As such it is not a thing; Truth is a living and dynamic actuality.

To understand what actuality means we can refer to Aristotle who explained reality in terms of *dunamis* and *energia*, or potentiality and actuality, respectively. Aristotle understood matter to be mere indeterminate potentiality, an abstract universality that could take on any determinate form or actuality. Determinateness or determination refers to thought. Thus Hegel conceived of the Aristotelian *energia* as actualizing subjectivity or as being a Subject. For Hegel the actual Truth is therefore Subject as much as Substance or being.[3] Therefore the Absolute or the Ultimate Truth can be understood as Subject, or God, not merely as Supreme Being but as self-determinate acting and actual Personality.



**Aristotle**

**Reference:**

- [1] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), §22
- [2] *ibid.*, §20
- [3] *ibid.*, §25