

Being and Human Being: Reflections and Projections Upon A Philosophical Tradition

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I. Introduction

In Book IV of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle establishes his course of research into “being as such,” differentiating metaphysical inquiry from the sciences that study only some limited aspect of being (Aristotle, 2001: p. 731, Met. III.6, 1003a.20). This study of being on its own terms, which Aristotle calls “first philosophy,” is primary in two senses: in the straightforward sense that it marks out philosophy’s foremost concern, but also in a historical sense, as the question of being stands at the start of the Western philosophical tradition. While philosophy (in this sense) is today generally dismissed in an age that defines itself as “post-metaphysical,” any future for the discipline lies in a reappraisal of this tradition. For today’s ongoing controversy between philosophy and the sciences can only be resolved through a modern revival of this Aristotelian project.

At first appearance, embracing this way of doing philosophy seems to only widen the gap between philosophy and modernity. Viewed from the perspective of natural science, philosophy’s study of being remains a fixation with generality incompatible with empirical research methods. In this view, Aristotle has, in a way, only succeeded in defining an outer limit to the sciences, which must remain as “exact” or “hard” sciences lest they degenerate into mere speculation. Frustrated with philosophy as an exercise in asking empty questions, popular scientific figures such as Stephen Hawking and Neil deGrasse Tyson have criticized the field as an antiquated and futile enterprise (Norris, 2011; Pigliucci, 2014).

I enter this controversy as a philosopher unconvinced by the typical responses of my contemporaries to this line of criticism. I doubt the Analytic philosopher’s protest that philosophy remains integral to the course of scientific inquiry. Scientific research has advanced dramatically over the past century just as it has grown increasingly independent of philosophy. I am also not satisfied with the (more Continental) genealogical defense of the discipline, advanced by Massimo Pigliucci against deGrasse Tyson, that philosophy remains the “intellectual mother of all science.” Even though science would do well to remember its history, the philosopher cannot defend philosophy in a merely historical sense. Science, as the direct investigation of the world as it presents

itself to us, will continue to proceed even if it forgets centuries of preliminary philosophical disputation—for scientists, “first philosophy” is only temporally first, the first attempt in a historical sequence of progressively advancing inquiry. Like a good mother, philosophy should recognize her children’s independence and take them at their word when they say that their projects very rarely involve explicit philosophical reasoning.

Instead, I see the best response of the philosophers to the scientists as somewhat similar to the response of the Catholic Church to the Reformation. When the iconoclasts criticized the church’s dependence on ornate imagery and promoted the simplicity of worship, the church did not reduce its Roman pageantry and attempt to mimic the austerity claimed by its new rivals. Rather, the Rome of the counter-Reformation became the Rome of Bernini, a defiant baroque celebration of the aesthetic. The challenge of Puritanism spurred a more self-conscious commitment to the sensuous representation of the divine. Likewise, what scientists today claim to be the deficiency of philosophy is precisely its distinctive glory. Philosophy can only be reconciled with science if it ceases to imitate it and instead becomes, as it were, less “scientific” and more “philosophical.” For however much philosophy has laid a foundation for science, it should not be assumed to share its aims and methods. Philosophy is not primarily suited to build and test theories of the natural world because this is not its objective. Philosophy instead responds to a *human* necessity, as we can now recognize that the ancient problem of being is inextricable from our modern concern with the human being’s self-awareness and self-cultivation.

Bringing Aristotle into dialogue with the modern sense of a free subjective self (particularly as expressed in Hegel and Heidegger), the question of being today arises essentially from the question of our own being. We require a concept of being to reckon with our own inner sense of infinite potential, with free subjectivity and its self-recognition that our “being” is precisely being in its widest possible sense, not merely a “something” simply given. It is only by reflection upon being, which is the widest possible abstraction, that we can view the human being in the widest possible scope. Natural science is at once affirmed in its domain—the positive being of the observable natural world—without acquiring the false conceit of methodological positivism, which is to say, an absolutism of the positive. The practical import of a concept of pure being is that we need not presuppose the predominance of objective data as opposed to subjective phenomena— both belong to being and must account for one another.

The schools of modern philosophy, eager to establish dogmatic first principles, begin by violating this openness and establishing a narrow concept of being which excludes its opposite. In the dominant model of scientific positivism, human subjectivity

is confined to an ontological orphanage, since it can never be present to experimental research and so can only exist as a second-class citizen, the mere negative of observable, quantifiable data. The task of philosophy today is to resist this premature resolution of being which can only result in the self-alienation of the human from the metaphysical order, a self-imposed exile from an indifferent world of mechanism, one which can be observed but in which we may never participate. Free from its limiting presuppositions, thought opens itself to pure being, the concept incapable of completion and so the only concept adequate to the infinite striving of free humanity.

I will develop this thesis more fully by showing how Hegel and Heidegger revive this Aristotelian legacy and bring it into dialogue with more contemporary schools of thought. These modern ontologists revive the true spirit of Aristotle in making the human being central to the question of being. Bringing the existential leitmotifs of humanism and phenomenology back in dialogue with “first philosophy,” they can be our guides in reintegrating a philosophy currently divided between a “subjective” humanism¹ and “objective” scientism, articulating a contemporary justification of philosophy rooted in the ancient idea of the good life as its own end.

II. Hegel: Being and Self-Consciousness

Hegel takes up the Aristotelian concept of being *qua* being by formulating it as “pure” being or being “without any further determination” (Hegel, 2010: p. 59). Being can be approached on its own terms only through this purity, this sheer indeterminateness. As the most general and universal of categories, it cannot contain the limitation inherent in a “something.” Yet, without any determination, pure being is indistinguishable from nothing. To understand being is precisely to eschew positivism in the recognition that being collapses into incoherence without its negative. The most universal concept can only be meaningfully understood as including that which it would seem to exclude. This incorporation of the negative becomes, for Hegel, the fundamental operation of a new logical “movement” in which the empty universal abstraction of being unfolds its determinations in the derivation of the categories, each one incomplete and unstable if abstracted out of this living interplay of conceptual relationships.

What concerns me here is not the complete movement of this logic but rather the correlation of this movement with the enrichment of human self-consciousness. Attempting to overcome the dualism of subject and object, Hegel’s logic deliberately declines to presuppose logical forms as articulating subjective or objective realities. Logic,

¹ For the purposes of this essay, this includes “subjectivist” traditions as diverse as Kantian transcendental idealism, existential humanism, and critical phenomenology.

at least at its outset, is meant to unpack being in its most general sense, prior to its division into subjective and objective spheres, which, for Hegel, is a derivative distinction and not the central question of being. The being which is always also nothing allows for the humanity of the negative, for the subjectivity of the always immeasurable, never fully “present” human being. No longer alienated from ontology, the negativity of our experience radically reframes the classical problem of being. When we proceed from the positivistic assumptions of natural science, being is always simply the being of a “something” with some positive quality or determination.

But this modern perspective is just an extension of the logic of presence which first led ontology into the Parmenidean trap. If being is only what is present to us, what is positive, the negative vanishes. Without the negative, there can be no change, no becoming, no passing through being and non-being. Hegel’s logic deftly avoids this Eleatic paradox by granting the negative its place in the logical order, thereby making room for the lived reality of subjective experience. The idea of “nothing” may be anathema to an empirical-evidence-based positivism, but it is a patent reality of our psychic lives, as we experience the negative (the “nothing” of anxious and hopeful possibility) just as fundamentally as the positive (the given world of immediate sense perception). Our experience demands a fuller logic, one in which being does not oppose itself to the essential negativity of subjectivity.

In recognizing the negative, Hegel provides a logical framework for the free self-development of human experience, recognizing both its determinacy and its indeterminacy. This association between the logical unfolding of being and the development of human freedom Hegel makes explicit in the final section of the logic, the logic of the concept. The pure concept is nothing other than the “I” or pure self-consciousness (Hegel, 2010: p. 514). When we lay out the nature of being, we simultaneously lay out the experience of human being. The being of self-consciousness is not the idiosyncratic “hard problem” it has become for Analytic philosophy. Thought’s thinking itself instead represents the pure self-relational freedom already implicit in the notion of pure undetermined being, being as contained only within itself, unlimited by any external preconditions.

III. Heidegger: The Being of *Dasein*

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger makes the association between being and human being his explicit starting point. Any inquiry into being must begin with an inquiry into the being of the one making the inquiry—the human being or, in Heidegger’s terminology, *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1962: pp. 26-27). Careful attention to Heidegger’s language shows that the

question of being is, more precisely, a question about the “meaning of being [*der Sinn des Seins*].” The significance of being to and for *Dasein* is the inescapable presupposition of any such inquiry. The question only arises because *Dasein* is the unique being for whom being is an “issue” (Heidegger, 1962: p. 32). Starting from this premise, the first division of *Being and Time* reconsiders the classical question of being through a radical new concept of human experience as “being-there [*Da-sein*],” a being-outside-of-itself (or *ekstasis*), a thrown projection existing anxiously in a world of significance. Ontological investigation begins in appreciating the unique human being whose being prompts inquiry into the meaning of being itself.

While the study of being always involves *Dasein* itself, natural science, for Heidegger, deals with being insofar as it is other than and separate from *Dasein*. Far from the aim of ontological research, the “sciences are ways of being in which *Dasein* comports itself towards entities which it need not be itself” (Heidegger, 1962: p. 33). Ontology begins only where objectivity ends, where the human being recognizes its own being as inextricable from the question at hand. Scientific objectivity is precisely the wrong standpoint from which to begin an investigation into being, because it studies beings in their plurality, as they present themselves according to their particular laws. The labor of science begins with the immediate appearances of foreign, external bodies and aims to draw out the logical and mathematical implications of those appearances. They are considered only as beings and not as relevant to the question of being itself.

To truly think of being, we must reverse this method of inquiry. Rather than beginning in externality, we must begin with the being of *Dasein*. Yet *Dasein* remains “ontically ‘closest’ to itself and ontologically farthest” (Heidegger, 1962: p. 37). This means that, by limiting ourselves to particular positive determinations (for Heidegger, the “ontic”), we interpret ourselves as only a being (a something), blind to how our being is the opening to being itself (for Heidegger, the “ontological”: pure being, being in general). When we see further and interpret ourselves ontologically, we realize the deep and inherent connection between ontology and phenomenology. Heidegger completes Hegel’s revival of first philosophy with the insight that ontology has the same fundamental content as existential phenomenology. Only human experience discloses being in its fullest significance, not merely in presence but in living motion, in its temporality and potential.

IV. Rereading Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*

Taking occasional cues from Hegel and Heidegger, I will now survey Books I and XII of the *Metaphysics* with a view towards making clear the role of human being in a science of

being. In *Basic Concepts of Ancient Philosophy*, Heidegger lays out a radical reinterpretation of the start of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* which brings out its existential aspect (Heidegger, 2008: pp. 19-22). The treatise on being begins with a human truth: by nature (φύσει) we all desire to know (Aristotle, 2001: p. 689, Met. I.1, 980a21). In Heidegger's gloss on this opening statement, Aristotle means that knowledge is not a "supplementary activity" (Heidegger, 2008: p. 20). Our desire to know is natural in the sense that it does not depend upon any external motivation, for, as Aristotle will say when he defines nature (φύσις) in Book V, beings are natural beings insofar as they have an origin (ἀρχήν) of movement within themselves.² The type of knowing involved in *Metaphysics*, which Aristotle also describes as "first philosophy," has its origin in the natural activity of the human being. We need not seek any reason or cause to know the nature of being beyond our natural inclination to do so. As Heidegger says at the start of *Being and Time*, the question of being arises in and through the being who seeks after being. By contrast, the practical sciences are always supplemental in the sense that they motivated by external ends, facilitating the human being's particular aims without satisfying her inquisitive nature. Aristotle's *Metaphysics* describes a science ultimately directed at human beings and our full actualization as knowers.

This first philosophy does not separate itself from lived experience, but rather engages it more deeply, resulting in increasingly self-aware forms of knowledge that enable us to become more than passive spectators of external events. Only through experience (ἐμπειρία) do craft (τέχνη) and science (ἐπιστήμη) arise.³ With the movement from experience to craft, the knowledge of the human being moves from the particular to the universal (Aristotle, 2001: p. 689, Met. I.1, 980a15-24).

Knowledge of the universal enables us to become increasingly self-sufficient. Those who have mastered a craft know the causes of what they do and so are able to work independently and even teach others, while workers who work only from their experience are less self-possessing, having been accustomed to their work only through habit (ἔθος) (Aristotle, 2001: p. 689, Met. I.1, 980a24-980b9).

Heidegger reads this development of knowledge in terms of its existential consequences, its enabling of a "freer orientation" for the human being (Heidegger, 2008: p. 21). Knowledge becomes philosophical insofar as it enables the human being to act outside of their immediate context and conditioning.

² ἀρχήν κινήσεως ἐν αὐτοῖς (Met. V.4, 1015a14).

³ ἐπιστήμη καὶ τέχνη διὰ τῆς ἐμπειρίας (Met. I.1, 981a.2).

To know the causes within a domain of knowledge (say mathematics or physics) is to be able to free oneself with respect to that domain. When the causes of things remain unknown, we must react to events as brute facts rather than as the products of causal conditions. Learning the causes enables us to move under our own power, naturally, freely. We cease to be mere subjects of the law and instead appropriate it to our own ends, no longer weighed down by gravity but instead using it as engineers charting a course through the heavens. Yet knowing the causes in any single domain does not put an end to inquiry, as the desire to know is not sated by practical or even theoretical knowledge of the sciences. Aristotle points out that history shows that the precise opposite is the case. In those civilizations in which the educated classes fulfilled their immediate scientific aims, knowing the causes in agriculture, architecture, and astronomy, they only then began to seek the final causes, or wisdom (σοφία) (Aristotle, 2001: p. 692, Met. I.2, 982b22-24).

The aim of this science is not productive (ποιητική), because it does not aim to produce mastery over any domain. Having been liberated from the conditionality of material existence, the mind does not rest, but seeks a science for its own sake, one which corresponds to and fulfills its nature as a being striving to know. Aristotle describes a human being whose freedom is the joy of pure wonder:

For it is owing to their wonder [τὸ θαυμάζειν] that men both begin and at first began to philosophize [...] and a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant [...] therefore since they philosophized in order to escape from ignorance, evidently they were pursuing science in order to know, and not for any utilitarian end [...] evidently then we do not seek it for the sake of any other advantage; but as the man is free, we say, who exists for his own sake and not for another's, so we pursue this as the only free science, for it alone exists for its own sake [μόνη γὰρ αὕτη αὐτῆς ἕνεκέν]. (Aristotle, 2001: p. 692, Met. I.2, 982b11-27)

Since wisdom deals with the first causes and origins (πρῶτα αἴτια καὶ τὰς ἀρχὰς) (Aristotle, 2001: p. 691, Met. I.1, 981b.29), it releases the human being from the bondage of limiting one's mind to the particularity of a scientific domain. In wonder, we open ourselves to the possibility that *knowledge itself* is the proper end we seek in accordance with our nature. The being of the human being is knowing as such; the aims of knowing are abstracted away just as the particularity of all content vanishes. In reflecting upon being, i.e. in philosophy, we experience the infinite range and universal scope of our humanity most fully.

These distinctly existential reflections on the meaning of wisdom in the first book are given more concrete definition in Book XII. Here, Aristotle moves from his account of

sensible substance to argue that there must necessarily be an unmoved mover underlying sensible phenomena. The special ontology of the unmoved mover, described as a divine self-consciousness, can also be observed in the most blessed moments of human theoretical life. Hegel concludes his systemic *Encyclopedia*, the system of his philosophy, by quoting this very passage; the first category of being has been developed to a philosophical self-consciousness that engenders and enjoys itself as its highest object of contemplation (Hegel, 2007: §577, pp. 276-277).⁴ The unmoved mover, the eternal, divine principle of all being, is the highest expression of psychic qualities (desiring, thinking) already present in the finite human being, who can share in this blissful state, even if only for a short time (Aristotle, 2001: p. 875, Met. XII.4, 1072b14-16). Never externally present while fully contained within itself, thought thinking itself is the nearest analogue to being as such — a form that acts upon itself as its own content. *This* is the pure being, irreducible to any finite determination — the human being free in reflection, not only knowing but knowing the meaning of its knowing.

While first philosophy may not directly enable us to achieve any particular expertise, it allows us to approach any science from this panoptic perspective, seeing it as in relation to the whole of being. The positive sciences lose their apparent self-sufficiency but return to dialogue with questions of human meaning, confronting the recognition that scientific technique alone cannot achieve the good life. No data set, for instance, will tell us whether we should visit the moribund in a time of plague or whether we should minimize our risk of exposure and leave them to die alone. Where medicine can predict the relative risks of our actions, it still must further reflect upon the inherent ethical implications of all medical decisions. Philosophy brings the “should” and “ought” of human culture back into dialogue with the “if-then” of predictive science. Rather than simply receiving scientific imperatives, we are equipped to engage scientific knowledge critically, as human beings of active conscience.

This is not to say that philosophy then simply becomes the realm of the negative, a defense of empty ghosts against the weight of evidence, a reactionary attempt to uphold cultural prejudices against the weight of empirical science. Just as the human being progresses from experience to science and finally to wisdom in the *Metaphysics*, the practical and technical sciences are not the enemies of philosophy but their very precondition. The panoptic view philosophy affords is only possible when we have first undertaken many discrete scientific inquiries. Moreover, philosophy, as the view of all which excludes nothing, must be equally responsive to scientific developments. Our human world, the world of cultural conditioning, ceases to be absolute as we weigh and consider other possibilities of ethical life, some of them suggested by new scientific

⁴ Here, Hegel is quoting (Met. XII.7).

discoveries, as when evolutionary biology shattered the Victorian sense of confidence in a rigid set of social mores. Whether culture shows the limits of science or sciences reveals the pretensions of culture, the dialogue between these unlike terms is the *essence of the philosophical*. To reflect upon being is to balance the sciences and the humanities against each other and thereby emancipate oneself from all conditionality; to emancipate oneself from conditionality is human freedom and human being. This is the meaning of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in its most modern revival.

V. Conclusion

Returning to the controversy at hand, we can respond to those who doubt the value of philosophy in this way: it is only through philosophy that we cease to think of ourselves as family members, professionals, and partisans, and that we see beyond the particularities of our birth, trade, and interest. Without a concept of being as such, the human being becomes mired in the unreflective one-dimensionality of roles without self-criticism, of competency without comprehension, of training without thought. Insofar as the modern world demands economic and personal specialization, it is hostile to philosophy, yet philosophy will only grow by being so limited. Defining ourselves according to the narrow particulars of our time and place only accents that we have already stepped beyond this limitation in knowing that our being could be otherwise. The straitjacket of the strictly positive cannot contain the vital yearnings of a being who knows that he is more than the "something" he presents himself as in the here and now.

The intellectual product of philosophy is not a law or formula but the self-comprehension of the human being, an understanding which cannot be checked against any external criterion of validity. Scientific error is self-correcting through the positive feedback loop of evidentiary verification, but forgetfulness of being blinds us to the very possibility of the good life. The failure to meet a finite, verifiable standard is obviously apparent in experimental error, whereas the failure to develop a human potential is a silent tragedy. Factual errors are readily revised, but nobody corrects "what is" on the basis of "what could have been."

Kant expresses this point negatively when he says that "concepts and judgements about ourselves and our deeds and omissions signify nothing moral if what they contain can be learned merely from experience" (Kant, 1996: p. 370, MM 6: 215). But where Kant seeks to derive a purely *a priori* basis for morality, morality as derived from the concept of being is rather, to borrow from Hegel, "encyclopedic" in the literal sense, an infinite circular return to first principles with the wisdom of experience, the growing self-awareness which makes moral progress possible. In a concrete and simple sense, the

general force of the concept of being can be observed in how the arts and sciences themselves cultivate the self-consciousness which is the precondition of moral self-awareness. Appreciating the whole of being in a spirit of wonder, a philosophical culture may well be less intellectually efficient than a scientific one, but it would not countenance the commonplace view that one is simply a “math person,” an “art person,” or a “businessperson.” A culture that so divorces the human being from being will inevitably be asked to excuse some people who simply aren’t “truth people” or others who just don’t do ethics. The philosopher of the future ceases to belong to one school *or* another and becomes the philosopher of the infinitely wonderful “*and*,” the philosopher of science *and* experience *and* logic *and* tragedy *and* comedy *and* joy. This philosopher stands with the Roman playwright Terence in proclaiming, “I am human, and I deem nothing human as alien to me” (Terence, 2001: pp. 186-187).

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