



## AN APPRAISAL OF THE MEANING OF *BEING*

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### Abstract:

This paper attempts a definition of the meaning of Being. It establishes the primordiality of Being as the rising point of all realities. The paper contends that the limits of human capacities are conditioned by their definition and knowledge of Being, and being so, that no one goes beyond his/her limits of knowledge. Using the methods of philosophical hermeneutics and analysis as theoretical frameworks, this qualitative study posits that human reality, their attainments and relationships are limited by their conception of Being. The paper maintains that whatever humans call anything that is what it is. Indeed, that whatever humans call anything or do, is hinged on human conception of Being. The paper insists that what we accept and do either in politics, economy, religion, etc is determined by our conception of Being. The paper concludes that humans as the shepherds of Being are the sole determiners of their own fate.

**Keywords:** Being, fate, human capacities, human conceptions, primordiality.

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## Introduction:

The problem of the meaning of Being, that primary stuff which underlies the existence of every other thing, has been a fundamental one. In fact, the more efforts that are being made at defining Being, the more eluding it seems to be. Being therefore has been conceptualised at different times and as occasions and environments warrant, so that there is confusion in the house of Being, and about the meaning of that ultimate constitutive element of the universe. This confusion has been in determining what is it that is responsible for the harmony in conflicts, unity in diversity, the one in many, or why there is something instead of nothing. In attempting an answer to this question, philosophers till date have sought for and continued to search for that primal principle of all things which transcend time and change, something which is permanent, the fundamental element which could explain the multiplicity or diversity in the universe.

This paper does not intend to contribute to the confusion in the house of Being. Its major intent is to show the intentional perversion of the meaning of Being to both exalt and abate different cultures by the shepherds, the interrogators of Being and the terror that confusion is building in world affairs.

## The Meaning Of Being

From the onset, philosophers have inquired into that primary element that defines all things. They have raised fundamental questions into that which is, the very thing that formed the base or basis of everything else, the timeless reality. For Thales, it is water that is the underlying unity in all things. For Anaximander, that timeless reality is infinite, eternal, and indeterminate. Anaximenes conceived it as Air. Anaximenes opines that "just as our soul being as air, hold us together, so do breath and air encompass the whole world" (Russell 36). For Pythagoras, nothing is, other than numbers. Numbers for him remains the constitutive element of that which is. For Heraclitus, the primordial element, that which is, is fire or *nous* or the One. He is of the opinion that fire is the essence of all things. According to Heraclitus, "all things are an exchange for fire, and fire for all things"(90). Thus for Heraclitus, fire is permanent, the basic reality that is responsible for flux and change in the world.

However, it was Parmenides who actually articulated the concept of Being. In his poem titled "On Nature" which consists in two parts namely 'Way of Truth' and 'Way of Opinion', Parmenides maintained an opposite stance with Heraclitus and argues that change is an illusion of the senses. He insists that "Being is one and unchanging. There is no becoming, nothing comes into Being and nothing goes out of Being. Being simply is and does not change. There is no change in reality, whatever is is and cannot become anything else. What we think are changes are simply illusions of the senses" (viii 15-20). He carefully and technically describes Being thus "Being the one, is and becoming change, is illusion. For if anything comes to be, then it comes either out of Being or out of not-being. If the former, then it already is in which case it does not come to be, if the latter, then it is nothing, since out of nothing comes nothing" (viii 15-20). Thus Parmenides' thesis sees unity in nature, reality as one, Being as all there is.

Nothing comes to be and nothing comes out of Being. This way, Parmenides' Being repudiates nonbeing, becoming or plurality of things. Instead, for him, Being is homogenous, unchanging and boundless. Thus Parmenides was the first to address the question of Being directly and Heidegger credited him for that.

After Parmenides, the question of Being almost went into oblivion as later Philosophers were not primarily concerned about the basic reality that defines all existence. For Plato, all that matter is the idea in the World of Forms which can be comprehended through meditative contemplation (323-325). Although Aristotle came close to the problem of Being in his theory of hylemorphism where he defined metaphysics (Ontology) as 'Being qua being', he maintained a common sense posture to oppose Plato's theory of ideas. According to Aristotle, in his doctrine of the universals, "it seems impossible that any universal term should be the name of a substance. For the substance of each thing is that which is peculiar to it, which does not belong to anything else; but the universal is common, since that is called universal which is such as to belong to more than one thing" (A 19, 11.1, BK 7,31, 1029a). Thus Aristotle holds that a universal cannot exist on its own except in particular things.

Subsequent Philosophers especially in the medieval and modern periods saw Being either as same with God or completely and consciously avoided any mention of the question of Being as was the case in the modern era, (the age that almost eliminated metaphysics) except however for Leibniz who posed a fundamental question of 'why there is Something instead of Nothing', and Hegel who conceived Being in his absolute Spirit as an indeterminate.

It was until Martin Heidegger appeared in the scene with a renewed call to the problem Being that Philosophers saw the definition of Being as a major task to solve a major problem in the world. In his *Being and Time*, Heidegger stated thus:

Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word Being? Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew the question of the meaning of Being. But are we nowadays even perplexed at our inability to understand and the expression 'Being'? Not at all. So first of all we must reawaken an understanding for the meaning of this question. Our aim in the following treatise is to work out the question of the meaning of Being and to do so concretely.(19)

One major concern that Heidegger had was why the question, and consequently the meaning of Being was forgotten when in effect that was what provided the inspiration for the metaphysical thoughts of Plato and Aristotle. Another major concern of Heidegger was the confusion that trailed the explication of Being from the early Greeks who saw Being as universal, indefinable and Indeterminate, obscure and hidden. Heidegger broke down this problem into three parts; the first is that Being is the most universal concept. The second is that Being is indefinable and the third is that Being is self-evident. In his analysis, Heidegger sees the presupposition of the universality of Being as already conceiving an implicit meaning of an entity, something that cuts across beings. For

Heidegger, the presupposition of the universal concept of Being is not the final bus stop, it would need further clarifications. The second prejudice about the indefinability of Being arose from the supreme universality of Being. But Heidegger insists that the problem of indefinability of Being does not eliminate the question of its meaning rather it demands that we look the question in the face. The third presupposition about the self-evident of Being arose from our vague feeling of understanding of Being which for Heidegger necessitates the renewal of the call of the problem of Being (23).

However, Heidegger is of the sincere opinion that our vagueness in the understanding of Being does not mean that we should do nothing about the explication of Being. Following this analysis, Heidegger proceeded to formulate more explicitly the question of the meaning of Being. Heidegger's idea is that Being is what is usually asked about or as he calls it "Being of entities" where entities are questioned in regard to their Being. He writes; everything we talk about, everything we have in view, everything towards which we comport ourselves in anyway, is Being; what we are is Being, and so is how we are. Being lies in the fact that something is, and in its Being as it is; in Reality; in presence-at-hand; in substance; in validity; in *Dasein*; in the there is (26).

For Heidegger, the entity that has the ability to make inquiry about Being and beings or what he technically calls *Dasein* should have the pride of place in the question about Being. *Dasein* for Heidegger is the being of man which remains the concrete way of investigating or gaining access to the question of the meaning of Being in general. *Dasein* means "existence". Man is *Dasein*: *Dasein* is not the same with empirical man. It is the essence of man. Heidegger's interest on Being was inspired by Franz Brentano's Descriptive Psychology that mental states are intentional in character and every consciousness is always directed at something (77-78).

In short, the German term for Being is *Sein* which is the infinitive to be. To be itself captures the essence or the primordially of Being. C.B. Okoro has defined it as the "ground, the soil, the foundation, the light that illuminates or brings into light whatever is" (10). It is the law of reason that governs the whole universe. Hegel described it as rational, absolute Spirit. For Nietzsche, Being is the most vaporizing thing. He dismissed it as the absolute nothing. It is that which enjoys an unusual presence, and domineering in everywhere so that every time we open our mouth, we utter Being; it is that which guarantees the unity of all there is, as Being in Being itself (Dimgba 12). Indeed, Being is unanalysable, indefinable, incomprehensible and indeterminate yet universal. It is the "isness" in all being, in all there is. It is the Being that gives other beings their meaning, the Being of beings, the one and the only that is.

As a subject of study, Being belongs to the science of ontology. Ontology, itself, is the core of metaphysics, the core of philosophy. Its goal is to study what belongs to human beings in general or what it means to be human at all. In other words, it determines the metaphysical capacity and capability of man which makes all other forms of human activity possible (Dimgba, Abia, 103). This means that ontology, the Being qua being, centres on the analysis of human life, human being or

human experience in order to reveal how human beings constitute and reconstitute the world and human experience metaphysically (Dingba, GUU, 185). It is the science of beyondness, the suprasensible.

### **Being As Logos**

J.I. Unah has described logos to have many imprecise interpretations such as concept, reason, judgment, ground, definition or relationship. However, he pointed out that the literal and fundamental meaning of logos is discourse. Logos as discourse means the same thing as to show or what makes manifest in a discourse. Logos as discourse helps us to see clearly by pointing it out, revealing or disclosing it (24-25). Following Heraclitus, the Stoics agree that logos is the principle of intelligibility which contains within itself the active principles or forms of all things to come (Omoregbe 122). For Okoro, it is the primordial principle of cosmic development accomplished through utterance, planning and governance, which expresses itself in thought, creative power, creative utterance, order and form. Logos is accorded primacy and primordially over and above phenomenon. This is principally because of the idea that since thought precedes action, then it means that the immaterial; the rational and intangible is superior and pre-eminent over and above the material, the sensual, and the tangible (4). Perhaps, it is in this notion of logos as a creative intelligence that Heidegger describes his Being of entity, the inquirer which Okoro says has the transcendent ability for meaning making or construction and for investigation; and which brings phenomenon into light (10).

### **Being As A Phenomenon**

Phenomenon is described as that which displays or shows itself. It can show itself as it is (manifest) or as it is not (semblance). It is usually equated with appearance, unconcealedness of what is present, it's being revealed. For Anthony Quinton, "Phenomenon is ordinarily private or subjective entities; impressions, sense-data, ideas; the things that really appear to or are directly perceived by, percipients, as contrasted with the public, objective, material things which are the presumed source, in some way or other, of them" (2). Phenomenon depicts reality, the there is, the totality of all that exists and which lies in wait for investigation. It is noteworthy that in traditional Western metaphysics, the notion of phenomenon has been confused with what appears as distinct from real reality or true Being. Plato particularly has equated phenomenon with appearance that which shows itself as something which it really is not. The Idea for Plato does not appear and consequently does not manifest itself. Rather the Idea is that which is granted to the mind when it rises in contemplation through dialectical reasoning above the sensuous. Thus for Plato, what truly manifests or shows itself is the imperfect copy of the original. True being is the Idea. Appearance, becoming is in the region of shadows and illusion (324-325). In the same vein, Kant has divided phenomenon into mere appearance and real appearance or what he called noumenon (thing-in-itself) and phenomenon (thing as it appears). His emphasis on sensibility and understanding (which springs from

rom a common but unknown root) must interact to yield (full) knowledge. For him, the human mind is not equipped to penetrate noumenon. It can only access what appears through its cooperation with the senses (A15, B29).

### ***The Connection Between Being And Nonbeing.***

The Parmenidian thesis that Being, the one is; nonbeing, becoming is not raises the question of what relationship that exists between Being and nonbeing, or does Being truly stand alone as Parmenides and indeed Western conception of Being wants us to believe. Without doubts, the true meaning of Being has been confused, distorted and perverted by the tradition of Western philosophy. By the confusion that trailed the interpretation of Being, Being itself has been sent on compulsory exile (Unah 14). But Being on compulsory exile would be more devastating to world peace. So something needs to be done to quickly recall Being from compulsory exile. To this imminent problem, Unah has an answer:

We should proceed to think Being and nonbeing together. That is the cerebral philosophical way of separating issues and making the all important distinction between Being and beings clear and distinct. We begin by stating that both Being and nonbeing belong together, that is, that a common affinity binds Being to nonbeing.(14)

Unah has also raised very fundamental questions on what affinity that actually holds Being and nonbeing together since they are diametrically opposed to each other. So, how does Being and nonbeing belong together? In what sense does a common cord tie Being and nonbeing together, how is the opposition which obtains between Being and nonbeing reconciled, and if it can be reconciled, is the reconciliation a temporal or permanent one (14-15).

First, as Unah tells us, a reflection into pure Being without any attachment would make our thought to wander endlessly into nothing. In other words, there is need to concretise our thoughts to save it from what Nietzsche calls 'vaporising into nothing'. This way, any reflection on Being, would be in relation to nonbeing. So there is no Being without nonbeing. A thought on one equals a thought on the other because they belong together. Being and nonbeing is therefore equiprimordial. One makes the other possible. They complement each other. On the other hand, a thought on nonbeing would eventually lead to something because thinking must always be thinking about something. Accordingly for Unah. "Every being in so far as it is a being has its foundation upon nothing, being is created from nonbeing"(31). Similarly, nonbeing has its base on Being for a thought of nonbeing eventually lead to Being. Also, from Hegel's dialects, Being and nonbeing are reconciled in becoming. Reality presents itself first as thesis, then opposes itself as antithesis and reconciles itself to itself as synthesis. In synthesis, both thesis (Being) and antithesis (nonbeing) agree so as to ensure continuity in life, since none can stand alone but needs the contributions of the other.

her. The thinking of bringing Being and nonbeing together is indeed a sure way of ending every ideological controversy or rivalry that is threatening global peace and security. For as long as something is, it signifies that another is also. And only the acceptance of this plurality or diversity will ensure continuity of peace in the world order.

### **Appraisal Of The Concept Of Being**

Overtime, efforts have been made to suppress nonbeing in preference to Being. This effort without doubt created confusion in the world. J. I. Unah observed that this confusion is occasioned by a mode of thought which permits one to assert that Being is such and such and negate every other thing that does not fall in line. Traditional metaphysics has prepared the ground for imposition of a way of thinking and talking which culminates in clashes of temperament and war (12).

The interpretation of what Being is, is responsible for obvious differences in the world. It is responsible for the uniqueness in human thought and human behaviour. It affects their concept of politics, economy and culture. Everything about a people is influenced by their concept of what is so that nothing else makes meaning to them. This is the origin of racial pride and racial discrimination which degenerates into racial superiority and tribal pride like the present case between the Fulani and other tribes in Nigeria. There is no saying that the world has been bifurcated into civilized and primitive peoples.

Unah has graphically represented the way people are perceived who conceive things differently. He writes;

Anyone who sees things differently from the fixed attributes which they are presumed to have would not be an objective person. Such a person would be a subjective person because he does not see things objectively. He does not see things the way they are rigidly, inflexibly, inelastically fixed. Such a person may indeed be regarded as a purveyor of shadows and illusion. (10)

Indeed, the person is not only brandished subjective, but primitive, barbaric, idol worshipper and superstitious. Without doubt, Europe is guilty of this offence. Unah has seemingly summed up Europe's attitude to others thus "the tradition of Western ontology is a tradition that identifies a principle of being, insists that the identified principles is the only true story about reality and struggles to trample upon whatever does not fit into its universe of meaning (13).

Indeed, Western ideologies and principles are based on metaphysical monism, absolutism and reductionism. Chiedozie Okoro defined metaphysical monism as that "parochial and fanatical attitude of reducing the whole of reality to a narrow perspective, in exclusion to other perspectives"(5). Okoro went further to identifying the basic problem with metaphysical monism as that which is "

domineering in attitude and by encroaching upon the domain of another, it sows the seed of discord, intolerance, fundamentalism and violence"(5).

Europe's monistic conception of Being is expressly manifesting in politics, economy and religion. In politics, liberal democracy is all there is. Other political ideologies are interpreted to mean barbaric, primitive, or at least not people oriented. There is no doubt that Western nations have so packaged and represented liberal democracy to stand as symbol of good governance which protects the interest of everyone member of the society. This way, liberal democracy has repudiated and suppressed every other ideology because nonbeing is an illusion.

The conception of Being the one, is, nonbeing, becoming is not, seems to have done more harm in the sphere of religion than any other aspect of life. The West has so much propagated their state or official religion of Christianity to mean the only true and God accepted religion. This way, every other religion and their practices are denigrated as falsehood, superstitious, idolatry, barbaric as well as primitive. "For there is no other way by which we can go to the father except through Christ". "Christ is the way, the truth and the life, no one cometh unto the father except by him". Thus their monistic definition of Being agrees with their monotheistic attitude in religion. Monotheism for them stands as the only supreme way to the God reality; every other approach is simply nonsensical.

Accordingly, the West sees every other economic orientation other than capitalism as ideology for revolt and poverty. Being for them is capitalism and any other economic ideology is an illusion. They do not want to see any other ideology and so make frantic efforts to suppressing other economic ideas. The concern however is how long will the West go in trampling under foot whatever does not fit into their scheme of things. What happens to world peace and stability if what is trampled upon today re-emerges tomorrow and demands vengeance for the sin done to it. This way, Unah thinks that "what is trampled upon in time, re-emerges to assert itself and avenges itself of the violence done to it by its repudiator or trampler. This pattern goes on and on until it reaches a point where global disaster or collective suicide is imminent"(13).

The fear is that there is imminent danger that is about threatening global peace. This is especially so when we see some other nations (especially the Asian Tigers and presently some African countries) rising up in anger against the violence that the West have perpetrated against other parts of the world. Additionally, the monism of Western thought has nurtured a tradition of violence and vengeance which has gradually reduced to terrorism of various shades. Today, we are witnesses of smaller nations that appear so inconsequential before as to threaten world peace are now gradually and doggedly building a balance of terror all over the globe primarily against the West for their previous acts of violence arising from their idea that Being is, nonbeing is not.

## Conclusion

The World from the beginning has been a world ruled by ideas, concepts, and ideologies. This represents the true notion or perspective of the people's concept of what true Reality is. More so, their meaning of Reality represents or defines their meaning of life, politics, economy, worship, etc, and sets the limits to what anyone or the society can attain in economy, science and technology. Indeed, the meaning of Being in any society and for any people defines the meaning of man, God, as well as the relationship between God and man, and between man and his fellow man. Certainly, no culture or society develops without a proper, indigenous understanding of the meaning of that which is, the timeless reality in their own land. In this lies the true meaning of cultural identity, the ontological and cosmic understanding of the there is, and what it means to be. In this sense also, Africa needs to discover her true identity via the discovery of her real Reality so that she can answer her name when nations of the world assemble.

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