

What Is Being?

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The question of “what being is” has been a fundamental question of philosophy from ancient times to the present. By tracing how such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Heidegger and Japan’s own Kitaro Nishida deal with this question, this treatise seeks to convert ontology from the ontology of substance to that of non-substance. Concurrently, it will attempt to connect this ontology of non-substance to the world view of today’s complex system.

1. Ontology of Substance

Questioning Being and the Wonder towards Being

As commonly known, Plato and Aristotle both claim that philosophy originates in wonder. In fact, Plato stated in his dialogue *Theaitetus* that, “For this feeling of wonder shows that you are philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy¹”. Aristotle also stated in his *Metaphysics* that, “It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize²”.

However, what, is the issue that this wonder that is the origin of philosophy wonders about?

When we reflect on this, for something to be, or for the world itself to be is truly a wonderful fact and that alone is, above all, enough to make us feel the emotion of wonder. The very fact that a being is a being is the source of wonder. The sense of wonder from which both Plato and Aristotle claimed philosophy originates must have been similar to this emotion of wonder for a being’s being.

It is from the wonder toward being of those beings that the philosophy of what being is begins. What is this being, which makes a being be, is the question that has been, is, and will continue to be asked, and yet eternally it remains impossible to answer.

What is it to “be”? What is this “be” that makes everything believed to “be” “beings”?

What does this “being”, which is making all beings be, symbolize? This is the primary question that philosophy must ask. Aristotle also states as follows;

*There is a science which studies Being qua Being, and the properties inherent in it in virtue of its own nature. This science is not the same as any of so-called particular sciences, for none of the others contemplates Being generally qua Being; they divide off some portion of it and study the attribute of this portion.*³

Each type of science only tends to deal with its specific being domains respectively and not with being as being, that is, being itself. In contrast, questioning being that makes the being be, or being as being, is the task of philosophy, especially of metaphysics. In other words, it is the task of a science that attempts to investigate, transcending phenomena, the true essence of what is behind, or the fundamental principle of being. Therefore, metaphysics shall be considered as a type of ontology. Aristotle referred to this most fundamental science that deals with being as being as “the first philosophy”. Philosophy begins and ends with the question of being. The first task of philosophy is to question what being is.

However, this is indeed the most difficult question and it cannot be easily answered. Plato also, in his dialogue *Sophist*, stated as follows:

*...do you tell us plainly what you wish to designate when you say “being.” For it is clear that you have known this all along, whereas we formerly thought we knew, but are now perplexed.*⁴

This quotation is very well known since Heidegger quoted it in the introduction of his *Being and Time*. As Heidegger also pointed out, the question of “what being is”, or the question regarding the meaning of being is the fundamental question Western philosophy has been asking since its establishment, and, at the same time, it is the question that has been left behind the most. Indeed, the word ‘being’ is very much worn-out, but at the same time, is always unthought of.⁵

Being Is Told in Various Ways

In addition, being has various meanings. Aristotle points out many times in *Metaphysics* that “being is told in various meanings,” and the discovery of the polysemy of being is one of his major achievements. Aristotle illustrated by example

this polysemy of being and derived various categories of being. For example, he stated as follows:

*...some predicates indicate what a thing is, and others its quality, quantity, relation, activity or passivity, place, time to each of these corresponds a sense of "being."*⁶

Thus, Aristotle had chosen as the category of being ten categories: "substance", "quantity", "qualification", "place", "time", "relative", "posture", "condition", "action" and "affection". "Substance" stands for "what it is", or the essential rule, e.g., "person" or "horse". "Quantity" indicates how much is there, e.g., "two feet" or "three feet". "Qualification" indicates what state it is in, e.g., "white" or "red". "Place" is about where it is, the location of being, e.g., "at the market". "Time" indicates when it is, e.g., "yesterday" or "last year". "Posture" indicates how it is being, e.g., "lying down" or "sitting". "Relative" indicates what it is related to, e.g., "double", "half" or "bigger". "Condition" indicates its possession, e.g., "wearing shoes" or "putting on armor". "Action" indicates doing something, e.g., "cut" or "burn". "Affection" indicates being something that is done, e.g., "being cut" or "burnt".

Categories (*katēgoria*) is the domain determined by predicative actions. The word "being" holds various meanings depending on the predication from each domain of categories. Although being is one, its meaning is numerous. The one is stipulated by the many.

What Substance Is

Among the many meanings of being, the one Aristotle emphasizes the most is "substance (*ousia, substantia*)". In fact, he claims that substance should be the first within all of the meanings. To Aristotle, being true is equal to being as substance, and substance is the primary independent entity. Thus, it suggests that the science about being is primarily the science related to substance.

*...the question which was raised long ago, is still and always will be, and which always baffles us – "What is Being?" – is in other words "What is substance?"*⁷

These words quoted from the volume Z of *Metaphysics* illustrates this very fact. From

this standpoint, in an attempt to contemplate on being as being, what Aristotle actually ended up attempting to contemplate on was not being in general but the entity.

What then is substance, will be the next question. Aristotle divides the meaning of “substance” into four types. The first type is “What it is of a thing”, that is “essence”, the second is “universal thing”, the third “genre”, and the fourth “substratum”. The “substratum” is further distinguished into three aspects, that are “matter”, “form”, and “thing that is both” which is an individual.

Among them, the fourth type “substratum (*hypokeimenon*)” originally meant “what is put underneath”, and it was what Aristotle thought to be closest to the meaning of “substance” above anything else. Among all entities, we can think of the last of things, which cannot be traced back any further. Assuming that this last thing is the “substratum”, it has to be the sole thing that never changes or moves, among things that change and move. Moreover, this will be the very “substance” itself and the truly being thing. Therefore, the being of “substance” does not depend on anything else but has being independently on its own and is not an attribute of anything but is itself the “substratum” of other attributes. “Substance” is the ultimate “substratum” that will not be an attribute of other things and is something that will be the subject but never a predicate. Aristotle considers the “individual” as such “substance”.

What is, then, an “individual”? Individual is a being as a being, a thing that is extant and the primary substance. If this individual as the primary substance did not have being, it would be impossible for anything to be. Even the qualification of things cannot have being independently on its own, separated from each individual. Categories such as qualification, quantity or relative are merely accidental qualities that accompany substance. Attributes such as qualification, amount and relative can be only when there is substance. Other categories only carry derivative meanings as the accidental quality of the substance.

In opposition to Plato’s theory of Ideas, Aristotle attempted to consider the individual as substance in the strict sense, for all the other things except the individual will either become predicates of the individual or are included in the individual.

For example, in the proposition of “Socrates is a man”, the only thing can be originally referred to as substance is the individual “Socrates”, and “man” is merely a universal

concept that subsume the individual “Socrates”. Indeed, in the proposition of “Socrates is a man”, Aristotle perceives both “Socrates” and “man” within the category of substance. However, in this situation, Aristotle put bigger substantiality to the individual “Socrates”, and considered the universal concept of “man” subsidiary. Aristotle attempted to consider the individual as the subject, and universality as something that could only be in relation to it.

Ambiguity of Aristotle

However, this is not yet sufficient to fully elucidate what the individual is. Therefore, Aristotle also defined the individual as something consisting of matter (*hylē*) and form (*eidōs*). What matter and form are tied to is the substance as individual. Matter is the raw material of a thing and is a possible being, meaning, it can become something but is yet to have appeared clearly. It could hold a shape but is yet to be shaped. It is something that supports changes but yet remaining as a possibility. Therefore, substance would not be formed only from matter. Unless matter takes shape and holds form, the individual would not materialize. Matter can be a certain thing only when it holds form.

Then, it would mean that it is the form that gives individuality to substance and not the matter. Possession of form is what establishes the substance as individual. If that is the case, then the substantiality must be acknowledged to form and matter, and hence to the universal concept as well. In fact, when dividing the meaning of substance into four types, Aristotle had counted “essence”, “universal thing” and “genre” in substance. Moreover, in the case in which substance was considered as “substratum”, he had also mentioned not only matter but also form as aspects of the substratum.

Essence is that which indicates what the thing (individual) really is, and has had being before the internalization of form within special matter. Though when accompanied by matter it becomes incomplete and generates and changes, essence is unchangeable, immovable and perfect. If substance is considered as something that stays the same, since essence is what unifies individuals, essence must be regarded as substance. This would mean that when “Socrates is a man”, the essential concept of “man” must be regarded as substance along with the individual “Socrates”.

Thus, in his *Categories*, Aristotle came to call individuals (such-and-such man, e.g.,

Socrates) the primary substance, and the universals (e.g., man in general) the secondary substance⁸. Since substance is something that will be a subject and not a predicate, an individual will primarily be substance. However, in the secondary sense, types and genre that subsume this individual would also be considered as substance. Not only individuals such as “Socrates”, but also types and genre such as “man” or “animal” will be substance. In fact, in *Metaphysics* also, the meaning of substance is ultimately narrowed down to individual and form⁹. “A thing that is (*to on*)” and “has being (*to einai*)”, or “is being” and “being being” at the same time must be considered as truly being. Of course, Aristotle regarded the individual that is the primary substance more important than types and genre that are the secondary substance. However, Aristotle failed to be thorough on this particularism.

Aristotle seems to have failed halfway through attempting to comprehend what the individual is. His pursuit of substantiality in the individual ultimately failed to define it, hence he ended up searching for that substantiality in the universal. Aristotle left it entirely ambiguous whether the individual or the universal possesses the true substantiality.

Aristotle had indeed attempted to acknowledge more substantiality to the individual but was not thorough enough and could escape the criticism of relapsing into the Universalism of Plato. In his *Theory of Idea*, Plato had explained the absolute advantage of the essential being indicated by forms. Plato thought that “what it is of a thing”, that includes “essence”, “universality” or “genre”, has being on their own separately from each individual thing. Thus, believing that this is the true being, he called it *Idea*. *Idea* is single, unchanging and self-identified. The always changing, kinetic and diverse intuitive individual materializes by sharing this *Idea*. When “Socrates is a man”, *Idea* is seen in the predicate “man”, which was regarded as the true being. Aristotle had gone back to this idea of Plato. In this aspect, Aristotle was indeed a legitimate disciple of Plato.

Thus, the argument of Aristotle on substance came to a very obscure conclusion. His description in fact must be regarded as fluctuating. Aristotle had restored the question of “what is being” to “what is substance”, and while attempting to elucidate the meaning of the substance, the meaning ended up continuously moving between the individual and the universal. The more he tried to elucidate the meaning of the individual as substance, the more he had to recognize the universal that stipulates

individual as substance. Moreover, if the universal were stipulated as substance, it would be impossible to ignore the substantiality of individual that is as a form of *energeia*, which is the collected universals. The origin of this fluctuation must be discovered.

Which Came First, the Universal or Individual?

The universal-and-individual problem, which has been around since the time of Aristotle, was also what prompted the famous problem of universals in medieval Europe. Among those arguments, the theory of realism considered that the universal precedes the individual and that the more universal a thing is, the better the meaning it resides on and therefore the universal was indeed substance. In contrast, the theory of nominalism, which considered that individual precedes the universal, argued that what has being is the individual and the universal concept would not be able to have being preceding the individual. Individual is the very substance and the universal has no being. The universal could only be in forms of spirit or language, which are merely sound. The function of the universal is seen in indicating things and events, and the universal concepts are revealed merely as symbols, they argued.

However, even in this argument of the universals, the fluctuation between the individual and the universals is inevitable. If we, as the theory of realism did, considered the universals as that which preceded the individual and put substantiality in the universals, the problem of how these individuals would be individualized and become visible individuals still remains. Moreover, no matter how the universals differentiated themselves, they will never reach the true individual. Likewise, as argued by nominalism, if considered that individual preceded the universals and was the very substance, the problem still remain as to how this individual would belong to the universal. Even with the explanation of “*universale in re* (the universal within thing)”, still how the universal could lodge within individual needs to be explained. The universal and individual are correlational, and one cannot be without the other.

This problem can also be considered as the problem between the essence (*essentia*) and the being (*existentia*). Essence stands for what the thing is, whereas being does the being of the thing. Realism considers that essence precedes being, explaining the superiority of essence over being. They consider “it is something” precedes “there is a thing”. In contrast, nominalism considers that being precedes essence, explaining the superiority of essence over being. They argue that “there is a thing” precedes “it is

something”.

However, here again the fluctuation between essence and being is inevitable. If it were thought that essence takes precedence as is argued in realism, there would be a problem of how being would manifest from there. Even if considered that being is already included within essence, still it must be elucidated as to how being would manifest from essence. Conversely, if it were thought that being takes precedence as is argued by nominalism argued, it still must be explained as to how the being would belong to essence. Essence and being also are in correlation and must be regarded that one cannot be without the other.

2. Ontology of Non-Substance

Correlation between the Universal and Individual

If the universal and the individual, the essence and being could be realized only in correlation and not by one of the pair, it suggests that the neither of them could hold substantiality on their own. If a subject has being based upon a predicate and at the same time a predicate upon a subject, it would mean that a predicate would not be realized without a subject and neither would a subject without a predicate. Subject and predicate are in the relation of mutual dependence. When things are in the relation of mutual dependence, no matter what the thing is, it cannot have being independently nor based on self-reliance.

This can be applied not only to the substantial relations such as the universal and individual or the essence and being, but also to the relation of substance and attributes. Categories of being mentioned by Aristotle: “quantity”, “qualification”, “place”, “time”, “posture”, “relative”, “condition”, “action” and “affection” are all regarded as attributes of substance and are accidental to the substance. If these attributes were attached to the substance by mere accident, it would suggest that these are not something essential to the substance. If that is the case, the being of the substance itself should not be affected in any way if stripped of these accidental attributes. Therefore, if all of these accidental attributes are stripped from substance, ultimately there should only be the substance-related proposition that describes the relation of individual and the universal, e.g., “Socrates is a man” left at the end.

Moreover, as Aristotle had argued, we were to regard the individual as the primary

substance and the universal as the secondary, the substance with higher substantiality between the two substances would be the individual, leaving the universal as a mere predicate linked to the individual that is the substratum. Therefore, if the universal as the secondary substance were to be omitted in order to leave only the highest substantiality, the substance that would be left at the end would be just the individual, for example, “Socrates” alone.

However, the question would be whether the “Socrates” as the individual in such a meaning would have any substantiality or not. The “Socrates” in this context would be a completely vacant individual who no longer possesses the height of such-and-such centimeters, no sarcastic personality, no locality of residence in Athens, no temporality of living in the 5th Century B.C., nor any other attributes, even the universality of being a man. We would no longer be able to recognize such an empty individual as that “Socrates” as the same Socrates. Socrates would be an invisible man. In pursuit of individual as the substrate that supports all attributes, we have accidentally encountered extremely vacant thing. If that is the case, it must be concluded that there is no substrate that could function as the support for all attributes. There is no substance. The substance as individual shall rather be considered as the non-substance.

Conversely, a subject is merely a collection of predicates. Just as an invisible man bears its man-like shape only after putting on a hat, wrapping bandages or wearing a coat, it may be that we should consider that the collection of various attributes’ accidents is what actually forms the substrate. Only after various attributes such as how many centimeter-tall, sarcastic, an Athens resident or a person from the 5th Century B.C. are collected together, an individual called “Socrates” will be created. A subject is the intersection of predicates. A subject originally is vacant on its own, and only after predicates are added on to it does it becomes visible as a subject. Aristotle had considered at first the individual as substance as a thing that would be a subject but not a predicate. However, the individual is merely a collection of the universals and various accidents to begin with, and must be considered as something that originally does not possess substantiality.

Nevertheless, it would not be a solution to the problem if we start pursuing substantiality in the direction of predicate, such as the universals or attributes. If what the subject is needed to be clarify, what the predicate, which is what stipulates the subject, needs to be stipulated. However, in order to achieve it, the predicate must be

subsumed in and stipulated by even bigger predicate. Thus, predicates will be destined to be predicated by bigger predicate successively. Nevertheless, this pursuit also will only lead to encountering the vanity, similarly to the search for the end of the outer space.

For example, in order to elucidate the substantiality of an individual called “Socrates”, if we traced back its essence from the universal concept to a bigger subsuming concept, e.g., from “man”, “animal”, “life form” to “thing”, this retroactivity would continue on endlessly and would end without the discovery of the final substance. The same thing would happen if tried to elucidate attributes of an individual such as “this rose” and traced back its various attributes such as “red”, “color” or “qualification”.

In *Parmenides*, Plato elucidated the contradiction of his own Idealism in the form of having Parmenides or Zeno criticize the statement of Socrates. Among the complicated discussions in *Parmenides*, the *aporia* (puzzlement) part of the so-called “Third Man Argument” basically sets its grounds of argument on the contradiction of infinite retroactivity of concept. In other words, he argued that if the being of Idea were to be acknowledged, other than “individual man” and “Idea of man”, there would be not only the Third man, but also the fourth, fifth, and on and on. However, in *Parmenides*, Plato argues over the “Idea of greatness” rather than the “Idea of human”. In either case, it means that the form of form will be thought about for a form, and for *that* form of form, the form of the form of form will be thought about. Thus, this retroactivity can be continued on endlessly and the ultimate form will never be discovered¹⁰. The more thorough the search of substantiality towards the direction of predicates gets, the more likely to hit void.

Whether towards the individual or the universal and no matter how thoroughly searched, the journey in search of substantiality will be a one-way trip down to the abyss of the void. It is commonly said that philosophy begins with wonder. From there, the question of what being is arises. In the background of this wonder and the question, though possibly in an insensible manner, the working of void was already anticipated.

The Western metaphysics, namely ontology, has always been fluctuating since the time of Plato and Aristotle and all through the Medieval and Modern times, alternately focusing on subject and predicate. It may be because it was tacitly felt that no matter which direction they searched into, nothing but the unsolvable void could be found within the scope of ontology. In fact, even if tried to reduce the question of “what being is” down to “what substance is” and elucidate the meaning of it, the very meaning of

the substance continuously moved between individual and the universal and fluctuated. In the medieval confrontation between nominalism and realism also, if pursued from the viewpoint of nominalism, the reason why an individual gets incorporated under a specific concept becomes obscure, whereas if pursued from the viewpoint of realism, the various developments of the individual that has being in reality become impossible to explain. It may be attributed to how the Western ontology (*ontologia*) stays within the scope of the being (*on*) and the language that describes it (*logos*), that is to say, within the limits of being and thoughts, and how it excluded the void as the field where it is placed, regarding it as something impossible to understand or think about.

Although Western ontology has been pursuing the question of “what substance is” since Aristotle, it is better to conclude that there is no substance. That is to say, it was a search after this non-being thing, like searching for a blue bird. Being is like an isolated island accidentally floating on the sea of the void. The Western ontology that had been attempting to pursue the question of “what being is” only on this isolated island is something that has been established on this uncertain foundation from the very beginning.

The Meaning of the Judgment Formula

The same conclusion can be reached through the analysis of the structure of judgment. The proposition “Socrates is a man” is a judgment. Judgment is to predicate about a subject. That is to say, judgment consists of the combining of subject and predicate. Therefore, a judgment formula usually consists of three items: subject, predicate and copula. For example, a subsumptive judgment “Socrates is a man” can be divided into the subject “Socrates”, the predicate “man” and the copula “is”. In this case, the copula “is” symbolizes the subsumption of the subject to predicate.

However, even after thorough pursuit of this subsumptive judgment in both subjective (individual) and predicate (the universal) directions, substance still could not be found. If that is the case, this subsumptive judgment may be something like a wave in the sea of void. Therefore, the copula “is” here may also be an expression of void. Rather, it was able to express the relation between subject and predicate only because it was an expression of void.

In a proposition such as “This rose is red”, the copula “is” that connects the subject and predicate is an expression of the relation between subject and predicate. There are

indeed various relations. All categories of being Aristotle had indicated shall be comprehended as expressions of the relation. If anything, among Aristotle's category chart, the category of relation may be the most important one. Subject and predicate are merely items of relation and have no substantiality on their own. What copula expresses is non-substantial relations. When think about a judgment formula "S is P", neither S nor P possess substantiality, and "is" only expresses the relation.

Both subject and predicate belong to non-substance, and so does the copula that expresses the relation of subject and predicate. However, this non-substance is also substantial non-substance, which expresses itself as a copula, and thus appears separately in both subject and predicate, developing rich and various existential relations.

Hegel comprehended the connecting of the universal and the individual in terms of the judgment formula as an embodiment of the universal, or an actualization of the "concrete universal" and thus elucidated the meaning of being. Namely, he thought that the universal formed from common factors extracted from each individual is merely an abstract universal, and that the true universal cannot be separated from individuality. Therefore, copulas in judgment formula express the individualization of the universal. The universal discloses itself to individual. Hegel thought that this disclosure of the universal is "judgment". To Hegel also, copula is something that stipulates the relation between subject and predicate. It proves, then, that the foundation of judgment is in copula. Thus, "Judgment (*Urteil*)" is the fundamental division (*die ursprüngliche Teilung*) of the fundamental one¹¹. However, Hegel could not conceive of the void working from behind it.

In contrast, Heidegger thought that while being is the most discussed and richest in contents of the philosophical subjects, at the same time, it possesses the greatest possible void and unregulatedness as well. He also argues that because of the deepest silence it keeps, it is the unfounded abyss that disobeys all comprehension¹². His argument can be regarded as the result of his gazing upon the void that works behind being.

Kitaro Nishida from our nation is the one who comprehended the structure of judgment with his unique theory, immersing himself into this void, or nothingness. Nishida converted Aristotle's theory of subject into theory of predicate and focused on things

that become predicate but not subject, rather than things that become subject but predicate. Subjective things are immersed in the deep bottom of predicate aspect and subsumed within predicative thing. He then perceived the place of void in the most common transcendental predicative aspect that would be predicate but not subject and comprehended the structure of judgment as the self-limitation of this place of void. Therefore, in Nishida's argument, copula that connects subject and predicate is regarded as the place that antecedently and fundamentally connects subject and predicate. In this place of void expressed by this copula, the transcending towards subjective aspect and predicative aspect will be made in the same direction. Individual thought by the subjective aspect is set in this place of void. Moreover, as the self-limitation of the place of void, individual will be there as true individual¹³. Nishida's locational logic has closely observed the void or nothingness, which works out in the depth of being and makes being a being.

In order to elucidate the ontological foundation of a system that forms itself from the mutual correlation of many factors, namely a complex system, an "ontology of non-substance" must be the foundation rather than an "ontology of substance". Because in a complex system, "being" must be reduced to "relation", and "relation" into "generation".

Notes

- 1 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155A
- 2 Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, I 2 982b12
- 3 *ibid.*, IV 1 1003a20
- 4 Plato, *Sophist*, 244A
- 5 Heidegger, *NietzscheII*, Gesamtausgabe Bd.6-2, V.Klostermann,1997,S.225
- 6 Aristotle, *op.cit.*, V 7 1017a24
- 7 *ibid.*, VII 1 1028b4
- 8 Aristotle, *Categoriai*, 5 2a 11-19
- 9 Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, VII 10 1035a2
- 10 Plato, *Parmenides*, 132A-133A
- 11 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, Gesammelte Werke Bd.12, Felix Meiner,1981,S.55
- 12 Heidegger, *op.cit.*, S.223-S.226
- 13 Kitaro, Nishida, *Hatarakumono kara Mirumono he*, Vol. 4 of the collection, Iwanami Shoten, 1979, from p. 218.

(Source: Michinori Kobayashi, “*Seimei no Tetsugaku*” Collection 5, “Fukuzatsu wo Tetsugaku suru” Minerva Shobo, Kyoto, 2017)