

I

A First Glance

The Importance of the Difference Between Having and Being

The alternative of *having* versus *being* does not appeal to common sense. *To have*, so it would seem, is a normal function of our life: in order to live we must have things. Moreover, we must have things in order to enjoy them. In a culture in which the supreme goal is to have—and to have more and more—and in which one can speak of someone as “being worth a million dollars,” how can there be an alternative between having and being? On the contrary, it would seem that the very essence of being is having; that if one *has* nothing, one *is* nothing.

Yet the great Masters of Living have made the alternative between having and being a central issue of their respective systems. The Buddha teaches that in order to arrive at the highest stage of human development, we must not crave possessions. Jesus teaches: “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?” (Luke 9:24–25). Master Eckhart taught that to have nothing and make oneself open and “empty,” not to let one’s ego stand in one’s way, is the condition for achieving spiritual wealth and strength. Marx taught that luxury is as much a vice as poverty and that our goal should be to *be* much, not to *have* much. (I refer here to the real Marx, the radical humanist, not to the vulgar forgery presented by Soviet communism.)

TO HAVE OR TO BE?

For many years I had been deeply impressed by this distinction and was seeking its empirical basis in the concrete study of individuals and groups by the psychoanalytic method. What I saw has led me to conclude that this distinction, together with that between love of life and love of the dead, represents the most crucial problem of existence; that empirical anthropological and psychoanalytic data tend to demonstrate that *having and being are two fundamental modes of experience, the respective strengths of which determine the differences between the characters of individuals and various types of social character.*

Examples in Various Poetic Expressions

As an introduction to understanding the difference between the having and being modes of existence, let me use as an illustration two poems of similar content that the late D.T. Suzuki referred to in "Lectures on Zen Buddhism." One is a haiku by a Japanese poet, Basho, 1644–1694; the other poem is by a nineteenth-century English poet, Tennyson. Each poet describes a similar experience: his reaction to a flower he sees while taking a walk. Tennyson's verse is:

Flower in a crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower—but *if* I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

Translated into English, Basho's haiku runs something like this:

When I look carefully
I see the *nazuna* blooming
By the hedge!

The difference is striking. Tennyson reacts to the flower by wanting to *have* it. He "plucks" it "root and all." And while he ends with an intellectual speculation about the flower's possible function for his attaining insight into the nature of God and man, the flower itself is killed as a result of his interest in it. Tennyson, as we see him in his poem, may be compared to the Western scientist who seeks the truth by means of dismembering life.

Basho's reaction to the flower is entirely different. He does not want to pluck it; he does not even touch it. All he does is "look carefully" to "see" it. Here is Suzuki's description:

It is likely that Basho was walking along a country road when he noticed something rather neglected by the hedge. He then approached closer, took a good look at it, and found it was no less than a wild plant, rather insignificant and generally unnoticed by passersby. This is a plain fact described in the poem with no specifically poetic feeling expressed anywhere except perhaps in the last two syllables, which read in Japanese *kana*. This particle, frequently attached to a noun or an adjective or an adverb, signifies a certain feeling of admiration or praise or sorrow or joy, and can sometimes quite appropriately be rendered into English by an exclamation mark. In the present *haiku* the whole verse ends with this mark.

Tennyson, it appears, needs to possess the flower in order to understand people and nature, and by his *having* it, the flower is destroyed. What Basho wants is to *see*, and not only to look at the flower, but to be at one, to "one" himself with it—and to let it live. The difference between Tennyson and Basho is fully explained in this poem by Goethe:

FOUND

I walked in the woods
All by myself,
To seek nothing,
That was on my mind.

I saw in the shade
A little flower stand,
Bright like the stars
Like beautiful eyes.

I wanted to pluck it,
But it said sweetly:
Is it to wilt
That I must be broken?

I took it out
With all its roots,
Carried it to the garden
At the pretty house.

TO HAVE OR TO BE?

And planted it again
In a quiet place;
Now it ever spreads
And blossoms forth.

Goethe, walking with no purpose in mind, is attracted by the brilliant little flower. He reports having the same impulse as Tennyson: to pluck it. But unlike Tennyson, Goethe is aware that this means killing the flower. For Goethe the flower is so much alive that it speaks and warns him; and he solves the problem differently from either Tennyson or Basho. He takes the flower "with all its roots" and plants it again so that its life is not destroyed. Goethe stands, as it were, between Tennyson and Basho: for him, at the crucial moment, the force of life is stronger than the force of mere intellectual curiosity. Needless to say that in this beautiful poem Goethe expresses the core of his concept of investigating nature.

Tennyson's relationship to the flower is in the mode of having, or possession—not material possession but the possession of knowledge. Basho's and Goethe's relationship to the flower each sees is in the mode of being. By being I refer to the mode of existence in which one neither *has* anything nor *craves to have* something, but is joyous, employs one's faculties productively, is *oned* to the world.

Goethe, the great lover of life, one of the outstanding fighters against human dismemberment and mechanization, has given expression to being as against having in many poems. His Faust is a dramatic description of the conflict between being and having (the latter represented by Mephistopheles), while in the following short poem he expresses the quality of being with the utmost simplicity:

PROPERTY

I know that nothing belongs to me
But the thought which unimpeded
From my soul will flow.
And every favorable moment
Which loving Fate
From the depth lets me enjoy.

The difference between being and having is not essentially that between East and West. The difference is rather between a society centered around persons and one centered around things. The having orientation is characteristic of Western industrial society, in which greed for money,

fame, and power has become the dominant theme of life. Less alienated societies—such as medieval society, the Zuni Indians, the African tribal societies that were not affected by the ideas of modern “progress”—have their own Bashos. Perhaps after a few more generations of industrialization, the Japanese will have their Tennysons. It is not that Western Man cannot fully understand Eastern systems, such as Zen Buddhism (as Jung thought), but that modern Man cannot understand the spirit of a society that is not centered in property and greed. Indeed, the writings of Master Eckhart (as difficult to understand as Basho or Zen) and the Buddha’s writings are only two dialects of the same language.

Idiomatic Changes

A certain change in the emphasis on having and being is apparent in the growing use of nouns and the decreasing use of verbs in Western languages in the past few centuries.

A noun is the proper denotation for a thing. I can say that I *have* things: for instance that I have a table, a house, a book, a car. The proper denotation for an activity, a process, is a verb: for instance I am, I love, I desire, I hate, etc. Yet ever more frequently an *activity* is expressed in terms of *having*; that is, a noun is used instead of a verb. But to express an activity by *to have* in connection with a noun is an erroneous use of language, because processes and activities cannot be possessed; they can only be experienced.

Older Observations: Du Marais—Marx

The evil consequences of this confusion were already recognized in the eighteenth century. Du Marais gave a very precise expression of the problem in his posthumously published work *Les Veritables Principes de la Grammaire* (1769). He writes: “In this example, *I have a watch*, *I have* must be understood in its proper sense; but in *I have an idea*, *I have* is said only by way of imitation. It is a borrowed expression. *I have an idea* means *I think*, *I conceive of in such and such a way*, *I have a longing* means *I desire*; *I have the will* means *I want*, etc.” (my translation; I am indebted to Dr. Noam Chomsky for the reference to Du Marais).

A century after Du Marais observed this phenomenon of the substitution of nouns for verbs Marx and Engels deal with the same problem, but in a more radical fashion, in *The Holy Family*. Included in their critique of Edgar

TO HAVE OR TO BE?

Bauer's "critical critique" is a small, but very important essay on love in which reference is made to the following statement by Bauer: "Love is a cruel goddess, who like all deities, wants to possess the whole man and who is not content until he has sacrificed to her not only his soul but also his physical self. Her cult is suffering; the peak of this cult is self-sacrifice, is suicide" (my translation).

Marx and Engels answer: Bauer "transforms love into a 'goddess,' and into a 'cruel goddess' by transforming the *loving man* or the *love of man* into the *man of love*; he thus separates love as a separate being from man and makes it an independent entity" (my translation). Marx and Engels point here to the decisive factor in the use of the noun instead of the verb. The noun "love," which is only an abstraction for the activity of loving, becomes separated from the man. The loving man becomes the man of love. Love becomes a goddess, an idol into which the man projects his loving; in this process of alienation he ceases to experience love, but is in touch only with his capacity to love by his submission to the goddess Love. He has ceased to be an active person who feels; instead he has become an alienated worshiper of an idol, and he is lost when out of touch with his idol.

Contemporary Usage

During the two hundred years since Du Marais, this trend of the substitution of nouns for verbs has grown to proportions that even he could hardly have imagined. Here is a typical, if slightly exaggerated, example of today's language. Assume that a person seeking a psychoanalyst's help opens the conversation with the following sentence: "Doctor, I *have* a problem; I *have* insomnia. Although I *have* a beautiful house, nice children, and a happy marriage, I *have* many worries." Some decades ago, instead of "I have a problem," the patient probably would have said, "I *am* troubled"; instead of "I *have* insomnia," "I *cannot* sleep"; instead of "I *have* a happy marriage," "I *am* happily married."

The more recent speech style indicates the prevailing high degree of alienation. By saying "I *have* a problem" instead of "I *am* troubled," subjective experience is eliminated: the *I* of experience is replaced by the *it* of possession. I have transformed my feeling into something I possess: the problem. But "problem" is an abstract expression for all kinds of difficulties. I cannot *have* a problem, because it is not a thing that can be owned; it, however, can have me. That is to say, I have transformed *myself*

into “a problem” and am now owned by my creation. This way of speaking betrays a hidden, unconscious alienation.

Of course, one can argue that insomnia is a physical symptom like a sore throat or a toothache, and that it is therefore as legitimate to say that one *has* insomnia as it is to say that one *has* a sore throat. Yet there is a difference: a sore throat or a toothache is a bodily sensation that can be more or less intense, but it has little psychical quality. One can *have* a sore throat, for one has a throat, or an aching tooth, for one has teeth. Insomnia, on the contrary, is not a bodily sensation but a state of mind, that of not being able to sleep. If I speak of “having insomnia” instead of saying “I cannot sleep,” I betray my wish to push away the experience of anxiety, restlessness, tension that prevents me from sleeping, and to deal with the mental phenomenon *as if it were* a bodily symptom.

For another example: To say, “I have great love for you,” is meaningless. Love is not a thing that one can have, but a *process*, an inner activity that one is the subject of. I can love, I can *be* in love, but in loving, I *have* . . . nothing. In fact, the less I have, the more I can love.

Origin of the Terms

“To have” is a deceptively simple expression. Every human being *has* something: a body,* clothes, shelter—on up to the modern man or woman who has a car, a television set, a washing machine, etc. Living without having something is virtually impossible. Why, then, should having be a problem? Yet the linguistic history of “having” indicates that the word is indeed a problem. To those who believe that to have is a most natural category of human existence it may come as a surprise to learn that many languages have no word for “to have.” In Hebrew, for instance, “I have” must be expressed by the indirect form *jesh li* (“it is to me”). In fact, languages that express possession in this way, rather than by “I have,” predominate. It is interesting to note that in the development of many languages the construction “it is to me” is followed later on by the construction “I have,” but as Emile Benveniste has pointed out, the

* It should be mentioned here, at least in passing, that there also exists a being relationship to one’s body that experiences the body as alive, and that can be expressed by saying “I am my body,” rather than “I have my body”; all practices of sensory awareness attempt this being experience of the body.

TO HAVE OR TO BE?

evolution does not occur in the reverse direction.* This fact suggests that the word for *to have* develops in connection with the development of private property, while it is absent in societies with predominantly functional property, that is, possession for use. Further sociolinguistic studies should be able to show if and to what extent this hypothesis is valid.

If *having* seems to be a relatively simple concept, *being*, or the form “to be,” is all the more complicated and difficult. “Being” is used in several different ways: (1) as a copula—such as “I am tall,” “I am white,” “I am poor,” i.e., a grammatical denotation of identity (many languages do not have a word for “to be” in this sense; Spanish distinguishes between permanent qualities, *ser*, which belong to the essence of the subject, and contingent qualities, *estar*, which are not of the essence); (2) as the passive, suffering form of a verb—for example, “I am beaten” means I am the object of another’s activity, not the subject of my activity, as in “I beat”; (3) as meaning to exist—wherein, as Benveniste has shown, the “to be” of existence is a different term from “to be” as a copula stating identity: “The two words have coexisted and can still coexist, although they are entirely different.”

Benveniste’s study throws new light on the meaning of “to be” as a verb in its own right rather than as a copula. “To be,” in Indo-European languages, is expressed by the root *es*, the meaning of which is “to have existence, to be found in reality.” Existence and reality are defined as “that which is authentic, consistent, true.” (In Sanskrit, *sant*, “existent,” “actual good,” “true”; superlative *Sattama*, “the best.”) “Being” in its etymological root is thus more than a statement of identity between subject and attribute; it is more than a *descriptive* term for a phenomenon. It denotes the reality of existence of who or what *is*; it states his/her/its authenticity and truth. Stating that somebody or something *is* refers to the person’s or the thing’s essence, not to his/her/its appearance.

This preliminary survey of the meaning of having and being leads to these conclusions:

1. By being or having I do not refer to certain separate qualities of a subject as illustrated in such statements as “I have a car” or “I am white” or “I am happy.” I refer to two fundamental modes of existence, to two different kinds of orientation toward self and the world, to two different

* The linguistic quotations are taken from Benveniste.

kinds of character structure the respective predominance of which determines the totality of a person's thinking, feeling, and acting.

2. In the having mode of existence my relationship to the world is one of possessing and owning, one in which I want to make everybody and everything, including myself, my property.

3. In the being mode of existence, we must identify two forms of being. One is in contrast to *having*, as exemplified in the Du Marais statement, and means aliveness and authentic relatedness to the world. The other form of being is in contrast to *appearing* and refers to the true nature, the true reality, of a person or a thing in contrast to deceptive appearances as exemplified in the etymology of being (Benveniste).

Philosophical Concepts of Being

The discussion of the concept of being is additionally complicated because being has been the subject matter of many thousands of philosophical books and "What is being?" has been one of the crucial questions of Western philosophy. While the concept of being will be treated here from anthropological and psychological points of view, the philosophical discussion is, of course, not unrelated to the anthropological problems. Since even a brief presentation of the development of the concept of being in the history of philosophy from the pre-Socratics to modern philosophy would go beyond the given limits of this book, I shall mention only one crucial point: the concept of *process, activity, and movement as an element in being*. As George Simmel has pointed out, the idea that being implies change, i.e., that being is *becoming*, has its two greatest and most uncompromising representatives at the beginning and at the zenith of Western philosophy: in Heraclitus and in Hegel.

The position that being is a permanent, timeless, and unchangeable substance and the opposite of becoming, as expressed by Parmenides, Plato, and the scholastic "realists," makes sense only on the basis of the idealistic notion that a thought (idea) is the ultimate reality. If the *idea* of love (in Plato's sense) is more real than the experience of loving, one can say that love as an idea is permanent and unchangeable. But when we start out with the reality of human beings existing, loving, hating, suffering, then there is no being that is not at the same time becoming and changing. Living structures can be only if they become; they can exist only if they change. Change and growth are inherent qualities of the life process.

TO HAVE OR TO BE?

Heraclitus' and Hegel's radical concept of life as a process and not as a substance is paralleled in the Eastern world by the philosophy of the Buddha. There is no room in Buddhist thought for the concept of any enduring permanent substance, neither things nor the self. Nothing is real but processes.* Contemporary scientific thought has brought about a renaissance of the philosophical concepts of "process thinking" by discovering and applying them to the natural sciences.

Having and Consuming

Before discussing some simple illustrations of the having and being modes of existence, another manifestation of having must be mentioned, that of *incorporating*. Incorporating a thing, for instance by eating or drinking, is an archaic form of possessing it. At a certain point in its development an infant tends to take things it wants into its mouth. This is the infant's form of taking possession, when its bodily development does not yet enable it to have other forms of controlling its possessions. We find the same connection between incorporation and possession in many forms of cannibalism. For example: by eating another human being, I acquire that person's powers (thus cannibalism can be the magic equivalent of acquiring slaves); by eating the heart of a brave man, I acquire his courage; by eating a totem animal, I acquire the divine substance the totem animal symbolizes.

Of course, most objects cannot be incorporated physically (and inasmuch as they could, they would be lost again in the process of elimination). But there is also *symbolic* and *magic* incorporation. If I believe I have incorporated a god's, a father's, or an animal's image, it can neither be taken away nor eliminated. I swallow the object symbolically and believe in its symbolic presence within myself. This is, for instance, how Freud explained the superego: the introjected sum total of the father's prohibitions and commands. An authority, an institution, an idea, an image can be introjected in the same way: I *have* them, eternally protected in my bowels, as it were. ("Introjection" and "identification" are often used synonymously, but it is difficult to decide whether they are really the same

* Z. Fišer, one of the most outstanding, though little-known, Czech philosophers, has related the Buddhist concept of process to authentic Marxian philosophy. Unfortunately, the work has been published only in the Czech language and hence has been inaccessible to most Western readers. (I know it from a private English translation.)

process. At any rate, "identification" should not be used loosely, when one should better talk of imitation or subordination.)

There are many other forms of incorporation that are not connected with physiological needs and, hence, are not limited. The attitude inherent in consumerism is that of swallowing the whole world. The consumer is the eternal suckling crying for the bottle. This is obvious in pathological phenomena, such as alcoholism and drug addiction. We apparently single out both these addictions because their effects interfere with the addicted person's social obligations. Compulsive smoking is not thus censured because, while not less of an addiction, it does not interfere with the smokers' social functions, but possibly "only" with their life spans.

Further attention is given to the many forms of everyday consumerism later on in this volume. I might only remark here that as far as leisure time is concerned, automobiles, television, travel, and sex are the main objects of present-day consumerism, and while we speak of them as leisure-time activities, we would do better to call them leisure-time *passivities*.

To sum up, to consume is one form of having, and perhaps the most important one for today's affluent industrial societies. Consuming has ambiguous qualities: It relieves anxiety, because what one has cannot be taken away; but it also requires one to consume ever more, because previous consumption soon loses its satisfactory character. Modern consumers may identify themselves by the formula: *I am = what I have and what I consume*.