
UNIT 4 ABSOLUTE NOTION OF BEING

(BEING AND ABSOLUTE)

Contents

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Starting With Heidegger
- 4.3 The Notion of Absolute
- 4.4 God, the Unlimited Existence
- 4.5 The Be-ing of Beings is Personal
- 4.6 Be-ing is Bliss
- 4.7 Responding to Be-ing
- 4.8 Some Quotes
- 4.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.10 Key Words
- 4.11 Further Readings and References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

- To conclude the course of metaphysics with a deeper understanding of Being.
- To identify the notion of Absolute with that of God cautiously.
- To enable us to appreciate the profound meaning of Be-ing, who is the source of everything, is finally the challenge to respond to it.
- To open the students to the limits of metaphysics where the mystical begins.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this concluding unit, attempt is made first to understand the dynamic meaning of Being. Then we try to bring in the notion of the Absolute and relate it to God. We take care to characterise this Absolute (or God) as unlimited and at the same time reaching out to the humans. The proper response of the humans then is to be open to the triad of faith-love-hope or *sat-cit-ananda* that is the fullness of existence.

4.2 STARTING WITH HEIDEGGER

In this unit we come to grips with the main work of metaphysics, according to Heidegger: the enquiry into the Being (act of existence) of beings (things that be). What occupies us mostly in this chapter, then, is to spell out and make explicit some of its implications.

We note, first, first of all, that the critical enquiry into beings as well as into Being is discovered to be intertwined and inseparable. As Heidegger himself admits, we have no direct access to Being: we can only attain it in and through things which we run into in our daily round, among which our own selves take

the primacy. For, in making a critical enquiry into the act of existence as it is manifested in our own selves, we already have an “insider’s view”, an intuition of what it is and involves. Our starting-point, the direct judgement, is a critical reflection on an undeniable activity of ours: hence, it lands us already in the existential order (i.e. Be-ing). Nor have we, like Descartes, imagined that we could elicit, as our most basic action, some inward-looking movement, divorced from all contact with the outside world. Indeed, there is no such thing: we can only know and affirm ourselves by knowing and affirming the external world in which we are. And such contact is grounded on their sensitive-rational act of direct judgement. Note what is relevant for us is the affirmation that something exists: we may be mistaken in what concerns its essence (what it is), but that something does exist is undeniable. In other words, it is and has always been Being that we have been focusing on throughout the process, whether it be my existence, the existence of direct judgement, or the existence of the affirmed object! Furthermore, the relentless analysis has shown that the ultimate goal of the existential act of direct judgement is yet another existence: pure, unlimited existence. Indeed, the only reason why “the things of this world” interest our intellectual activity at all is because they are partial realisations of that ultimate and unlimited existence which is responsible for our intellectual drive. We ended the quest by realising that we have to grant that this “unlimited existence” is not, cannot be, a mere mental fabrication (a concept) but something eminently real. Indeed, it is so real that all other realities derive their existence and actuality from it (Desbruslais 1977).

We shall now spell out some of the conclusions that can be derived from all this, after briefly understanding the notion of Absolute.

4.3 THE NOTION OF ABSOLUTE

The Absolute is the concept of an unconditional reality which transcends limited, conditional, everyday existence. It is sometimes used as an alternate term for “God” or “the Divine” (especially, but by no means exclusively) by those who feel that the term “God” lends itself too easily to anthropomorphic presumptions. The concept of The Absolute may or may not (depending on one’s specific doctrine) possess discrete will, intelligence, awareness, or even a personal nature. It is sometimes conceived of as the source through which all being emanates. It contrasts with finite things, considered individually, and known collectively as the relative. As such, the word “Absolute” signifies a negative concept: non-relative, non-comparative, or without relation to anything else. This is reflected in its Latin origin *absolutus* which means “loosened from” or “unattached.” (Wikipedia)

This term is employed in modern philosophy with various meanings, but applied generally speaking to the Supreme Being. It signifies (1) that which is complete and perfect; (2) that which exists by its own nature and is consequently independent of everything else; (3) that which is related to no other being; (4) the sum of all being, actual and potential (Hegel, Pace 1907).

In the first and the second of these significations, the Absolute is a name for God which Christian philosophy may readily accept. Though the term was not current in the Middle Ages, equivalent expressions were used by the Scholastic writers in speaking, e.g. of God as Pure Actuality (*Actus Purus*), as uncaused Being, or

as containing pre-eminently every perfection. St. Thomas, in particular, emphasizes the absoluteness of God by showing that He cannot be classed under any genus or species, and that His essence is identical with His existence. Aquinas anticipates the difficulties which arise from the use of the term Absolute, in the sense of unrelated being. It was urged that the Absolute could not consistently be thought of or spoken of as First Cause, for the reason that causation implies relation, and the Absolute is outside of all relation; it cannot, therefore, be conceived as producing effects. St. Thomas, however, offered a solution. He holds that God and created things are related, but that the relation is real only in the effects. It implies no conditioning or modification of the Divine Being; it is in its application to God, merely conceptual. The fashion of our thought obliges us to conceive God as one term of a relation, but not to infer that the relation affects Him as it affects the created thing which is the other term. This distinction, moreover, is based on experience. The process of knowledge involves a relation between the known object and the knowing subject, but the character of the relation is not the same in both terms. In the mind it is real because perception and thought imply the exercise of mental faculties, and consequently a modification of the mind itself. No such modification, however, reaches the object; this is the same whether we perceive it or not (Pace 1907).

Now it is just here that a more serious difficulty arises. It is claimed that the Absolute can neither be known nor conceived. "To think is to condition"; and as the Absolute is by its very nature unconditioned, no effort of thought can reach it. To say that God is the Absolute is equivalent to not saying that He is unknowable. The Absolute (or God), though incomprehensible, is nevertheless knowable according to the manner and capacity of our intelligence. The Agnostic contends that God, precisely because He is the Absolute, is beyond the range of any knowledge whatever on our part. Agnosticism, in other words, insists that we must believe in the existence of an absolute and infinite Being, and at the same time warns us that we can have no idea of that Being. Our belief must express itself in terms that are meaningless (Pace 1907). To avoid this conclusion one may reject altogether a term out of which all significance has evaporated; or (and this seems a wiser course) one may retrace the genesis of the term and hold fast to the items of knowledge, however imperfect and however in need of criticism, which that genesis involves. In proving the existence of God as First Cause or as Absolute Being, we take facts that are knowable and known as our starting-point. So far as, in reasoning upon these facts, we are led beyond them to the concept of an Absolute, some remnant of the knowableness which facts present must be found in that which is the ultimate explanation of the facts. If, "every one of the arguments by which the relativity of our knowledge is demonstrated distinctly postulates the positive existence of something beyond the relative", it follows that by getting clearly before our thought the meaning of those arguments and their force for distinctly postulating we must obtain some knowledge of the Being whose existence is thus established. Spencer, indeed, does not realize the full import of the words "positive existence", "ultimate reality", and "incomprehensible power", which he uses so freely. Otherwise he could not consistently declare that the Being to which these various predicates apply is unknowable. It is in fact remarkable that so much knowledge of the Absolute is displayed in the attempt to prove that the Absolute cannot be known. Careful analysis of a concept like that of First Cause certainly shows that it contains a wealth of meaning which forbids its identification with the

Unknowable, even supposing that the positive existence of the Unknowable could be logically demonstrated. Such an analysis is furnished by St. Thomas and by other representatives of Christian philosophy. The method formulated by St. Thomas, and adopted by his successors, keeps steadily in view the requirements of critical thinking, and especially the danger of applying the forms of our human knowledge, without due refinement, to the Divine Being. The warning against our anthropomorphic tendency was clearly given before the Absolute had taken its actual place in philosophic speculation, or had yielded that place to the Unknowable. While this warning is always needful, especially in the interest of religion, nothing can be gained by the attempt to form a concept of God which offers a mere negation to thought and to worship (Pace 1907). The Absolute, which philosophers seek to understand, may not be identified as God, at least initially. But at the end of our philosophical search or metaphysical journey, believer may equate both of them with proper care and caution.

4.4 GOD, THE UNLIMITED EXISTENCE

Coming back to our understanding of Being as proposed by Heidegger, we can claim that such a Being reveals itself to us (*Dasein*). All things that be, participate ontologically – that is, are totally and always dependent – on the unlimited existence. This, as we have seen, is nothing but creation seen from the point of view of the creative cause. Only God can create, for only uncreated, infinite, unlimited existence is God. In other words, God is existence, existence pure and simple, existence unrestrained by any composition or limitation (which comes to the same thing). In other words, the analysis of intellectual dynamism had revealed to us that the Being of beings is God! This doesn't mean that my existence is God: my existence is a finite, limited existence very specially participating in God: it is partially and secondarily what God is primarily and fully. Nor is the identification of God with unlimited existence anything startlingly new and unheard of. Thomas Aquinas did the same thing (by way of a questionable hermeneutics of Exodus 3:14). Thus, in *Summa Theologica* (ST Is, 13, 11), where he is discussing what the most appropriate name for God is, he concludes that “He who is” would be the best choice, even better than “The Good”, for it does not signify any particular form, but rather existence itself. Since the existence of God is His essence and since this is true of nothing else. ..., it is clear that this name is especially appropriate to God, for the meaning of a name is the form of the thing named (Desbruslais 1977).

Hence the most proper name of God is one which designates his basic dynamism. Just for the record, when God tells Moses, in response to the latter's demand to know God's name, “Jahweh”, the meaning was not something like “I am the one whose very essence is to be”, or “I am pure existence, the one that must be!” Situating Moses' question in the context of Jewish culture, it was more than likely that he was desirous of knowing God's name so as to be able – hopefully – to manipulate Him: after all, in Jewish culture, to know the name of someone/something meant to have some power over that being! So, as Jewish scholars tell us, God's answer most likely meant something like, “I am who I am: it's none of your business!” A few others suggest that it might also imply, “I am the one who is true to his promises.” Whatever be the merit of Aquinas' metaphysical comment in this connection, it can hardly be derived from an exegesis of the text.

4.5 THE BE-ING OF BEINGS IS PERSONAL

As we have seen, there is no real composition in Be-ing, in God. Above all, there is no materiality, the basic principle of indetermination which resists presence of self, as Rahner (1994) so rightly deduces. Inasmuch as there is nothing in Be-ing to resist presence to self, Being is perfect self-transparency, perfect presence to self, and perfect consciousness. But as we have seen, an intellectual supposite is a person. Now the most perfect form of presence to self, implies the most perfect form of knowing (or intellectuality, if you prefer). Thus God is personal. This, too, is nothing very revolutionary. Aristotle, approaching the issue from another path, concluded that God by his very nature is *noesis noesos* (thought thinking of itself), again perfect self awareness (Desbruslais 1977).

However it is not at all difficult to show that Be-ing is also (and very specially), LOVE – which is the basis of the definition of person that I have championed, along with such giants like St. Albert the Great. For, we have noted that all beings participate ontologically in Be-ing which, thereby, is their creator. As (unlimited) Be-ing, God has no need of anything. Hence God, in creating, has nothing to gain: it is an act of pure giving, in which nothing is sought in return. This is nothing but another name for love (See The Bible I John 4:8) . The definition of God as Love is more revolutionary than we realise. Pascal culminated against “the God of philosophers” (like Aristotle) who is seen as a cold Absolute, more or less wrapped up in himself (*noesis noeseos*). John’s definition sees God as the very antithesis of a detached Absolute. Love is by its very nature relational. This necessary relational nature of God is seen in His/Her inner life whereby He/She is, in effect, a community (Trinity) and not an isolated monad. This relationally spills over in the free act of creation which binds all creatures to Him/Her inextricably. He/She creates but does so out of no lack or need – purely out of the unconditional act of sharing love!

4.6 BE-ING IS BLISS

Be-ing is perfect self awareness and is devoid of any kind of limit whatsoever. Hence Be-ing is perfectly aware of its fullness, of the fact that there is nothing lacking. This, in turn, is but another word for BLISS, UNALLOYED JOY. Thus we can say, in agreement with the basic insight of Indian thought, that our enquiry into the Be-ing of beings (which gives us an insight into the Unlimited Be-ing in which they participate) is – as the ancient Indian sages had intuited – *sat-cit-ananda* (Being-consciousness-joy). Indeed, approaching reality from the more immanent perspective in keeping with our Indian tradition, one could make a case for these as the three basic transcendentals, corresponding to the one-true-good that swims into our ken when beings are viewed from the complementary Western, whereby we go out of ourselves in a cognitive act of exteriorisation. Of course the “Indian transcendentals” would also be applied analogically to beings, inasmuch as they participate or share in it at various degrees – in what the ultimate Be-ing is fully (Desbruslais 1977).

It is no slight encouragement to us when we discover that traditional Eastern and Western metaphysics show little difference in their final conclusions ... just as there is scarce any major discrepancy to be found in the sharings of the great mystics of all religions. While speaking of Rudolf Otto we can show that there is

practical unanimity, that the core of the encounter with the *ganz Andere* (the wholly other) is the experience of the *mysterium fascinans*: one realises that what one is faced with is something wholly other than anything one has experienced in this world (hence “mystery” is the best name for it); one’s first reaction is awe and fear – one trembles as one suddenly becomes more and more aware of the all holiness of this other and of one’s pervasive unworthiness: indeed, one’s first reaction invariably is headlong flight; then comes a culminating, overwhelming conviction that the Other is gracious, grace-radiating and seems to be saying, “Come closer. Don’t be afraid.” Finally, the moment of loving mystical oneness (climaxing in adoration, prayer or worship) gives way to a prophetic sending forth to set others free. The grand finale of the meeting with God (or Be-ing) is the sense of commission, of being sent forth to do the work of justice. Of course, I have over-simplified and hurried things along a bit. It doesn’t always unravel itself in such a clear, chronological, and pointed direction, but it can be discerned to be “at work” in that way nevertheless. Mystics and metaphysicians seem to meet each other at this climactic moment of union.

4.7 RESPONDING TO BE-ING

A concluding word about the reactions and responses that the encounter with Be-ing elicits from us may be useful. There seems to be, once again, a threefold dimension, interrelated and intertwined here too.

There is first (logically, not necessarily chronologically) a moment of enlightened encounter. As one personally meets Be-ing, one is gradually purified of wrong notions and attitudes as regards the Supreme Reality. This calls for a lot of openness and honesty as it often entails letting go of some of our favourite prejudices and brain-washed rigidities. Then – since the will follows the intellect – comes the moment of love. Corrected, purified knowledge of Be-ing, derived from an inter-personal encounter, calls forth from one a great surge of love – love for the gracious goodness of the Other. And as one is more and more caught up in the outgoing, unconditional love of Be-ing, one cannot but find oneself seized and carried along that same outgoing movement of sharing, of unconditional love to other beings. In other words, there comes the third and final movement of action, benevolent and beneficent action for those in need of it – action for justice (Desbruslais 1977).

And, once again, we find we join hands with the great mystics and sages of India. For what are these three moments but the traditional *margas* or paths to the Absolute: *jnana* (knowledge), *bhakti* (devotion or love) and *karma* (action or service). What may need to be emphasised here, however, is that there is to be no water-tight compartmentalising of the three, much less an endless debate as to which of the three, in isolation, is “the most excellent way”. For knowledge cannot be liberative unless it be informed by love (else it could descend into proud Gnosticism) and love cannot be redemptive without being enlightened by knowledge (otherwise we would be led to all manner of fanaticism) and neither of the two are fully authentic until they spell themselves out in justice-seeking actions for all beings.

Finally we can find yet another assimilative echo of all these in the other well-known triad, faith-hope-love. Nor can these, in the last analysis, be separated from each other. Faith cannot be really salvific, if it is merely “belief that”. It has

to be “belief in” and we can only believe in one whom we love. Hope is nothing but loving, trust-filled action for justice, an action that never wanes in spite of difficulties and apparent failures because it is filled with hope that is grounded in faith and love. I leave it to the student to discover for herself/himself how faith-hope-love, *jnana-bhakti-karma*, *mysterium-tremendum-fascinans*, *sat-cit-ananda*, one-true-good, and Father-Son-Spirit are intimately bonded together. What God had joined together, let us not (by unwarranted metaphysical speculation) seek to put asunder. Understood thus we can make sense of the paradoxical statement: “My end is my beginning!” (Mary, Queen of Scots).

4.8 SOME QUOTES

- “To be or not to be – that is the question!” (Shakespeare, Hamlet)
- “I am Who I am ...” (Exodus 3 : 14)
- “Let us be moral. Let us contemplate existence.” (Mr.Pecksniff in Charles Dickens’ Martin Chuzzlewit)
- “We will now discuss in a little more detail the struggle for existence.....” (Charles Darwin, The Origin of Species)
- “Man’s love is of man’s life a thing apart, ’Tis a woman’s whole existence.” (Byron, Don Juan)
- “Instead of starting with the heavens and firmament, mountains and oceans and drifting clouds, with things, and peeling all these away in a vain search for something, somehow more precious at their center, do the opposite. Instead of withdrawing inward, toward some imagined bit, some atom (which will surely slip away the moment you think you have it) – instead of this, try to proceed outward, and see heaven and earth, mountains and oceans and drifting clouds, all you have been taught to regard as things, as others, as foreign and distant, see all these as they are. You will be momentarily astonished to find yourself and nature in one and the same; and far from dreading nothingness, which now seems like sickness, and hardly worthy of anyone, which is how you began all this, your state of mind will be just the opposite. You will rejoice in being, in nature, in your self, which will now have ceased to be any mystery, and you will finally understand without seeking further what Spinoza meant by the intellectual love of God (Taylor, *Metaphysics*, 126)

4.9 LET US SUM UP

The absolute may be regarded as the Being, the beginning, and end of our metaphysical search. With care and caution, towards the end of our search, we can identify that Being or Absolute with God, for theists. Such a God or absolute can be seen as the unlimited existence, that is unalloyed bliss and perfect consciousness (*sat-cit-ananda*). We can respond to such a gift of existence personally or individually only through love.

4.10 KEY WORDS

- Gnosticism** : The doctrines of certain pre-Christian pagan, Jewish, and early Christian sects that valued the revealed knowledge of God and of the origin and end of the

	human race as a means to attain redemption for the spiritual element in humans and that distinguished the Demiurge from the unknowable Divine Being.
<i>Mysterium-tremendum-: fascinans</i>	Numinous (from the Classical Latin numen) is an English adjective describing the power or presence of a divinity. The word was popularised in the early twentieth century by the German theologian Rudolf Otto in his influential book <i>Das Heilige</i> (1917; or <i>The Idea of the Holy</i> , 1923). According to Otto the numinous experience has two aspects: <i>mysterium tremendum</i> , which is the tendency to invoke fear and trembling; and <i>mysterium fascinans</i> , the tendency to attract, fascinate and compel. The numinous experience also has a personal quality to it, in that the person feels to be in communion with a Holy other. The numinous experience can lead in different cases to belief in deities, the supernatural, the sacred, the holy, and the transcendent.
<i>Ganz Andere</i>	: With regards to our understanding of the absolute (or God), <i>ganz Andere</i> implies that it is “totally other” or completely different.
Be-ing	: Here Being is used with a hyphen to stress the dynamic or verbal aspect of Being.
<i>Noesis -noeseos</i>	: Following Aristotle scholastic philosophers think of an Absolute Being Being Who is pure actuality, and Whose life is self-contemplative thought (<i>noesis noeseos</i>) or Thought thinking about Itself.

4.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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Student Satisfaction Survey

Student Satisfaction Survey of IGNOU Students

Enrollment No.	
Mobile No.	
Name	
Programme of Study	
Year of Enrolment	
Age Group	<input type="checkbox"/> Below 30 <input type="checkbox"/> 31-40 <input type="checkbox"/> 41-50 <input type="checkbox"/> 51 and above
Gender	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female
Regional Centre	
States	
Study Center Code	

Please indicate how much you are satisfied or dissatisfied with the following statements

Sl. No.	Questions	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Average	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
1.	Concepts are clearly explained in the printed learning material	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	The learning materials were received in time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	Supplementary study materials (like video/audio) available	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	Academic counselors explain the concepts clearly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	The counseling sessions were interactive	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	Changes in the counseling schedule were communicated to you on time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	Examination procedures were clearly given to you	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	Personnel in the study centers are helpful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	Academic counseling sessions are well organized	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	Studying the programme/course provide the knowledge of the subject	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11.	Assignments are returned in time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12.	Feedbacks on the assignments helped in clarifying the concepts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13.	Project proposals are clearly marked and discussed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14.	Results and grade card of the examination were provided on time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15.	Overall, I am satisfied with the programme	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16.	Guidance from the programme coordinator and teachers from the school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

After filling this questionnaires send it to:
Programme Coordinator, 115, G Block, IGNOU, Maidan Garhi, New Delhi-110068