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# UNIT 1    BEING AND ESSENCE

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## 1.0    OBJECTIVES

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In finite beings, there is an inseparable relation between Being and essence. Being is that which is in some way or something; whereas essence is the principle of determination or limitation of Being into finite (limited) being. Being in itself is unlimited, infinite. In this Unit we discuss:

- Being and its characteristics
- Essence and its characteristics

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## 1.1    INTRODUCTION

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Human finds oneself confronted by two types of beings in the world: finite things and finite persons. They are distinguished by their unique relationship to Being. Things participate in Being according to their essence, and strive towards the fullness of Being accordingly. But the things cannot distinguish Being from its concretization in essence. Hence their actuation does not break through to Being itself and ultimately make explicit the essence. Hence things remain blank for themselves and for other things. They are of themselves silent partners for Human. In persons, the human encounters beings like himself, i.e., other fellow human beings. The humans participate in Being through their essence in such a way that in their actuation they at once distinguish Being from essence and so attain to Being itself. In other words, the human person is capable of complete reflection on oneself. By virtue of this reflection the human can reduce the outermost externals of things to the most intimate inwardness of Being itself. Hence we see an essential connection between person and Being. In things, Being is alienated from itself, while in the person it is at home or has possession of itself. Consequently, things appear as diminished beings over which human persons or experiencing agents tower as full beings. Being is most intrinsically personal, appearing in its own self as person. That is why an understanding of Being calls for an analysis of the metaphysical structure of the human person.

The experiencing agent is as structured as one’s operation is. “As the operation is, so the agent is.” The operation is composed of exercise and determination. Hence the experiencing agent (person) must also be composed. The experiencing agent is composed of the Being (*esse*) and essence (*essentia*). Essence is composed of substance and accidents. Substance is composed of prime matter and substantial form. The prime matter is in potency; whereas the substantial form is in act.

The finite being has to be identical with Being; for Being is immanent in this finite being, because this being *is*. This identity is not perfect because alongside *this* being there are also other finite beings. Being, insofar as it is immanent in this being through a certain identity, is not unqualified Being. For, unqualified Being transcends *this* particular Being. The immanent Being is a modified, finite, and limited Being. It is the *proper* Being of the particular being. The limiting principle (essence) is neither Being nor being. Nevertheless, the limiting principle constitutes *this* being as this *being*, and expresses a modification of the unqualified Being into a limited *being this* and nothing else. Whatever essence has, it derives from the relative opposition to Being, to which as a modifying principle it refers by its whole nature and from which it has also its modifying capacity. Hence, Being lets itself be modified or limited, and according to the limitation the finite being participates in unqualified Being. The unqualified Being, which transcends all modes, does not fully coincide with the *proper Being* of each being which is only in a limited way. The finite being is through *participation* in unqualified Being. To explain this participation, we must admit that within the finite being there is a distinction between its *proper Being* and the principle through which Being becomes its own limited Being, i.e., its own modifying and limiting essence. The relativity of essence and Being cannot be fully reciprocal. Being as being, transcends all modes of being and therefore all modifications through essence, while the essence is fully relative to Being. However, in the finite being, Being has let itself be modified. In a sense, the essence is prior to being insofar as the mode modifies Being into *being this*. But this priority is not absolute; for the mode also arises from Being which includes in itself the possibility of being-finite, becoming ‘incarnate’ in the finite. Hence, Being is prior to essence; for Being makes the mode a mode of Being. Perhaps, the unqualified Being points to a ground which is transcendent not only relatively to finite beings but absolutely. Our experience of something reveals the ontological difference between Being and beings. Beings are posited in and by Being (act of existing). The beings are not Being itself. This difference implies the finiteness of beings. The finiteness of the beings is a condition of the possibility of all enquiry in which we enquire *whether* it is and *what* it is. The first question inquires about the Being’s act of existing (act of Being) and the second about the Being’s essence (whatness or quiddity).

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## 1.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF BEING

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### Being (*esse*) as the Principle of Reality of Beings

Should something possess no act of existing, but only an essence, then it is a mere possible and not real. The real differs from the possible because of Being. In other words, Being is that in a being which makes it real, distinguishing it from a merely possible being. Being is the inner principle or ground of that which really is and through which beings are in themselves. We cannot conceive of Being simply as a mere state into which a previously constituted essence would somehow be transferred. It is rather that which makes real whatever is real, including all determinations of a being, including its whatness. Hence, *Being is the universal ground or principle of all beings and of their determinations.*

### Being as Objective of the Pure Desire to Know

Being is the objective of the pure desire to know. The desire to know means the dynamic orientation manifested in question for understanding and reflection. It

is the fundamental drive that carries the cognitional process from sense and imagination to understanding, from understanding to judgement, and from judgement to the complete context of correct judgements called *knowledge*. It is simply the inquiring and critical spirit of human. It moves a human to seek understanding, and then it prevents one from being merely content with one's own imperfect, subjective, personal experience. This desire is pure, as it differs radically from other desires by compelling assent to the unconditioned. Pure desire is a cool, disinterested, and detached desire.

### **Being as Unrestricted Notion**

At the root of all that can be affirmed or conceived is the pure desire to know. It is the pure desire that underlies all judgement and formulation, all questions and all desire to question. The objective of the pure desire to know is Being. It is the source not only of answers, but also of their criteria; not only of questions but also of grounds on which they are questioned. In other words, there is a cool, detached, disinterested desire to know at the root of cognitional process, and its range is unrestricted. Such an unrestricted notion is Being.

### **Being as a Spontaneous Notion**

There is a distinction between the spontaneously operative notion and theoretical accounts of its genesis and content. The spontaneously operative notion is invariant. It is common to all human beings. It functions in the same manner, irrespective of what theoretical account of it a human may come to accept. The theoretical account of the content and genesis of the notion are numerous. They vary with philosophical contexts. Spontaneously operative notion is present, invariant in all. The notion of Being is such a notion present in all, and thus extends to everything that is known and unknown. It is true that Being is known in judgment. It is in judgment that we affirm or deny. Until we are able to affirm or deny we do not yet know. Although Being is known only in judgment, the notion of Being is prior to judgment. For, judgment presupposes reflection, reflection presupposes question, and question presupposes the desire to know. The desire to know is the desire to know Being, which is immanent to self or spontaneously operative. It is all-pervasive and underpins all cognitional contents and penetrates them all, constituting them as cognitional. All cognitional contents, such as ideas and concepts, are responses to the desire to know, and all judgments are responses to the demand for the unconditioned. It is the notion of the to-be-known through that content which is prior to every content. The 'to-be-known through the content' passes without residue into the known through that content as each content emerges. The notion of Being also constitutes all contents as cognitional (can be known) levels of knowing: experience, understanding, and judgment. *Experience* is the first level of knowing. It presents the matter to be known. *Understanding* is the second level of knowing. It defines the matter to be known. *Judgment* is the third level of knowing by which the experienced is thought and the thought is affirmed or denied. Hence, Being is really known in judgment by which it is known as Being. Hence, knowing is knowing Being, yet the known is never mere Being, just as judgment is never a mere 'yes' apart from any questions that 'yes' answers.

### **Being as the Core of Meaning**

The notion of Being is the core of meaning as it underpins all contents, penetrates them, and constitutes them as cognitional as we have already seen. Meaning can

be distinguished from the viewpoint of its sources, acts, terms, and the core. A *source of meaning* is any element of knowledge such as data, images, ideas, and concepts; the grasp of the unconditioned and judgment; the detached and unrestricted desire to know. *Acts of meaning* are of three kinds: formal, full, and instrumental. *The formal act* of meaning is an act of conceiving, thinking, considering, defining, supposing, and formulating. *The full act* is an act of judging. *The instrumental act* is the implementation of a formal or of a full act by way of words or symbols in a spoken, written, or merely imagined utterance. The *all-inclusive* terms of meaning is Being, since apart from Being there is nothing. In this way, the *core* of all acts of meaning is the intention of Being. A given judgment pertains to a context of judgments. It is from the context that the *meaning* of the given judgment is determined. For, the meaning of the judgment is an element in the determination of the universal intention of Being.

### Beings as the Appearance of Being

The objectivity of Being is conditioned by the pre-apprehension. Human knows about Being in general, in one's active dealings with the world. One knows about it insofar as such knowledge is the condition or horizon of objective conceptual knowledge of material beings. These material beings are the initial starting points and hence also the permanent basis of all cognitions. Thus, human ever remains dependent on these starting points, even in transcendental reflection on Being in general. During the course of such reflection, the object of knowledge may be changed. But the structure and the way in which these objects have to be grasped, remains unchanged. When Being is conceived, it is to be conceived in the manner of an 'object' in the world, in the manner of an appearance. Being in general, and all that is immaterial, is conceived in the manner of material beings. That is to say, it is considered as a being which 'has' Being. One cannot conceive a thing existing in itself, in any other way. Hence the origin of all human concepts is through the senses. Even non-material beings cannot be comprehended by humans, apart from reference to an appearance through which this non-material being becomes a datum. Hence Being, both in direct knowledge and in metaphysical reflection, can be grasped only through Being that appears. Even transcendental reflection on Being is effected necessarily through objects. Therefore, Being in general is disclosed to humans in the appearance of beings, insofar as these most general definitions of Being in general are known through beings. Human becomes aware of this 'ontological difference' between Being and being in the act and fact of questioning.

Question is something final and irreducible. Every attempt to place the question in question (i.e., to question the question) is itself again raising a question. So Human is bound to question. Hence it is the absolute fact which refuses to be replaced by another fact. This question is a metaphysical question. The metaphysical question is the reflexive articulation of the question about Being which pervades the ground of human existence itself. It turns upon itself as such and thereby turns upon the presuppositions of the question. The transcendental question does not merely place something asked about in question, but also the one questioning and the question itself. Hence, absolutely everything is placed in question. This is the pervasive question about Being itself, raised to conceptual form. Therefore, in raising the metaphysical question, human becomes aware of what one is in the ground of one's essence.

The necessity of this question is based on the fact that human has access to Being only as something questionable. The ground of this necessity is not any question. For, human can avoid asking a particular question. But one cannot avoid the question about Being in its totality. One has to ask this question about Being in its totality if one is to be at all. Hence human exists as the question about Being. In this question, Being presents and offers itself as that which is questioned and withdraws itself as that which necessarily remains in question. Hence, human is the Being of the question. In this Being of the question, Being reveals itself and conceals itself in its own questionableness.

When we ask questions, we not only know how things are in relation to us but also how they are absolutely, in themselves - what it is in itself. In this way, the unconditioned, absolute Being puts an end to human question. The very act of questioning reveals that even if we only explicitly inquire about a relative validity for our own personal need, this relative validity itself is posited as Absolute. Behind the relative horizon there is always an absolute horizon. 'Validity for me' can be spoken of only because we contrast it with 'validity in itself'. The horizon of our questioning is the Unconditioned. The unconditioned is expressed in the word *IS* (Being). Here Being is the unconditioned condition of all questioning. It is the absolutely necessary. It is always and necessarily presupposed as the condition of every question. It is co-affirmed in the very act of questioning. Otherwise, we cannot even ask a question.

### **Being as the Unlimited**

If the horizon of our knowing is limited, then our knowledge cannot be absolute. In a limited horizon, we cannot ask about the ultimate, absolute, unconditioned point of view. Hence, the horizon must be unlimited. To penetrate into the *intensively* deepest core of Being, we must reach the *extensively* widest range of Being. That which constitutes the ultimate, unconditioned reality of things is *Being*, and that which affects absolutely everything, without any limitation, is also Being. Therefore, Being is the ultimate reality both *intensively* and *extensively*. The horizon of Being within which we ask the question as question is unlimited.

### **Being as Knowing and Not-Knowing**

Every question implies that we know about Being. For, we cannot question about something of which we do not know anything at all. However, the question also presupposes that we do not know about Being. In this way question manifests both the identity of Being and knowing, and the distinction between them. In other words, our knowledge about Being consists in the identity of Being and knowing, and our not-knowing about Being consists in the non-identity of Being and knowing.

### **Being as the Cause of the Contingent Beings**

Every being is necessary and not necessary. It is not necessary insofar as it is a finite being. But if it is necessary, it is as necessary as Being. Then, insofar as it is, it can no longer not be. It necessarily is, insofar as it is. This is possible only if every being possesses something which determines it to the necessity of Being. Otherwise, it would by itself be both necessary and not necessary which is contradictory. Therefore, every contingent being requires a positive element by which it is determined to the necessity of Being. It requires a ground, a sufficient reason of its being.



Contingent beings do not have their ground in themselves. Their ground lies outside of themselves. They are posited into being by something else. To bring forth some reality which goes beyond one's own being and essence is to act. The contingent being is the product of the activity of some other being. Its exterior cause is an efficient cause which brings it about. Consequently, every contingent being which is, is necessarily posited into being by an efficient cause, by Being itself.

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### 1.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF ESSENCE

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Essence is the principle of determination which makes a thing what it fundamentally is. The concept originates with Aristotle (384-322 BCE), who used the Greek expression *to ti en einai*, literally 'the what it is to be', or sometimes the shorter phrase *to ti esti*, literally 'the what it is'. This phrase presented such difficulties for his Latin translators that they coined the word *essentia* to represent the whole expression. For Aristotle and his scholastic followers, the notion of essence is closely linked to that of definition (*horismos*). The English word 'essence' comes from the Latin *essentia*, which was coined (from *esse*, 'to be') by ancient Roman scholars in order to translate the Greek phrase *to ti en einai*.

Like his teacher Plato (428-348 BCE), Aristotle's philosophy aims at the universal. Aristotle, however, found the universal in particular things, which he called the essence of things, while Plato finds that the universal exists apart from particular things, and is related to them as their prototype or exemplar (Plato, more mystical, a higher power; Aristotle, more essentialist, the form of things within). For Aristotle, therefore, the philosophic method implies the ascent from the study of particular phenomena to the knowledge of essences, while for Plato the philosophic method means the descent from a knowledge of universal Forms (or ideas) to a contemplation of particular imitations of them. For Aristotle, 'form' still refers to the unconditional basis of phenomena but is 'instantiated' in a particular substance.

According to Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), essence or quiddity is that through which a thing is constituted in its proper genus or species. Essence is also called form, for the certitude of a thing is signified through its form. The same thing is also called nature. Nature is what we call everything that can in any way be captured by the intellect, for a thing is not intelligible except through its definition and essence. Every substance is a nature. But the term nature used in this way seems to signify the essence of a thing as it is ordered to the proper operation of the thing.

For Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), essence is *ideal*. However, *ideal* means that essence is the intentional object of the consciousness. Essence must be distinguished from actual existence, just as the pure Ego must be distinguished from the psychological or empirical Ego. Essences are non-real, while facts are real. The realm of transcendently reduced phenomena is non-real, while the realm of actual experience is real.

Existentialism received existence from Jean Paul Sartre's (1905-80) statement that for human beings "existence precedes essence". Inasmuch as 'essence' is a cornerstone of all metaphysical philosophy and the grounding of rationalism, Sartre's statement was a refutation of the philosophical system that had come

before him. Instead of 'is-ness' generating 'actuality,' he argued that existence and actuality come first, and the essence is derived afterward.

In Indian metaphysical perspectives, a distinction is made between one's *swadharma* (essence) and *svabhava* (mental habits and conditionings of ego personality). *Svabhava* is the nature of a person, which is the result of his or her *samskaras* (impressions created in the mind due to one's interaction with the external world). These *samskaras* create habits and mental models, and those become our nature. While there is another kind of *svabhava* that is a pure internal quality - *smaran* - we are here focusing only on the *svabhava* that was created due to *samskaras* (because to discover the pure, internal *svabhava* and *smaran*, one should become aware of one's *samskaras* and have control over them). *Dharma* is derived from the root *dhr* - to hold. It is that which holds an entity together. That is, *dharma* is that which gives integrity to an entity and holds the core quality and identity (essence), and form and function of that entity. *Dharma* is also defined as righteousness as well as duty. To do one's *dharma* is to be righteous, to do one's *dharma* is to do one's duty (express one's essence).

Indeed, the concept of Buddhist emptiness is the strong assertion that all phenomena are empty of any essence, demonstrating that anti-essentialism lies at the very root of Buddhist praxis. Therefore, within this school, it is the innate belief in essence that is considered to be an afflictive obscuration which serves as the root of all suffering. However, the school also rejects the tenets of idealism and materialism; instead, the ideas of *truth* or *existence*, along with any assertions that depend upon them, are limited to their function within the contexts and conventions that assert them, somewhat akin to relativism or pragmatism.

### Essence as Nature

Sensible things are individuals as they exist in themselves in the real world. These sensible things are known by the intellect in abstraction from their designation in a particular matter. So abstracted, they are still composed of matter and form. They are conceptualised with a content of matter and form in general, but not in particular. In so abstracting from the particular they abstract from place and time, and exhibit their natures under an aspect that is found in all individuals. The abstracted, the nature considered as a potency to Being, is called the thing's essence which is abstracted with precision, though what is abstracted does not fully coincide with the thing. The essence abstracted rescinds from or excludes the individuality. It represents only a part of the thing. The essence and the individuality go together to compose the thing. Hence, essence abstracted with precision cannot be predicated of the thing. For instance, one cannot say man is humanity, any more than one can say that one is one's arm. Rather, one has one's humanity. In this sense, a thing is not its own essence, but has its essence.

### Essence as Thing

Essence can also be abstracted without precision. Such an abstraction excludes nothing in the thing, but contains the individual designation implicitly and indeterminately. It can be predicated of the thing in complete identity. For instance, a human is one's own essence when the essence is abstracted without precision. Essence and thing are identical. It is correct to say that the essence exists or that the thing exists, when the abstraction of essence does not proceed from individuation.

### **Essence as Common**

The essence can exist both in reality and in the human intellect. In reality it exists in individuals, as in the case of humanity that exists in millions of human beings. The same essence is found separately in every one of these many individuals. It is common to them all. The same essence can exist in one's own intellect or in the intellect of anyone else who thinks of it. As a universal, it represents all individual human beings in the one concept. It has a unity of its own as universal, just as it has a unity that is individual in every particular human person. Of itself, the essence can have no unity. If it had the unity of an individual of itself, it would always be that individual. In the same way, if the essence had of itself the all-embracing unity of a universal, it could never be found in several individuals. "But the same essence is found in many individuals and in the universal concept. It is common to all. It is a common nature".

### **Essence as the Ground of Particular Instances**

The individual of a species presupposes the common nature of the species as its ground. Human cognition presupposes the real individuals from which it abstracts the universal. Every individual rose is a particularization of a certain plant nature and every individual human is a particularization of human nature. In other words, the essences as they exist in the First Cause are the ground of the individual nature. Hence, Being is absolutely prior to essence.

### **Essence as Formal Causality**

Even though an essence in itself is devoid of Being, its potentiality distinguishes it from utter nothingness. It is a potency to real existence; while nothingness has no potency to real existence. Negations like nothingness, contradictions like a square circle, and privations like blindness, are not essences. They can receive cognitional being, but not real being. They cannot exist in the real world, but only in the contradictions of human reason. But an essence has to have a positive formal aspect of its own which (essence) determines the existential, and thus it exercises formal causality. Form is always seen to determine act. Form is the act of matter which determines matter. But in regard to existential act, form determines only as potency. It is the potency that limits the existential act which determines it to the existence of a tree, a stone, or whatever the essence happens to be. As it determines only as potency, the essence does not have to have any actuality prior to the receiving of its existential act. It is able to determine and limit without requiring any actuality in priority to Being. "As the subject of existence it calls for no prior being of its own, and as the determining principle of existence it demands no actuality. It receives its actuality from the existential act it determines".

In the order of formal causality, essence determines Being and the form of the thing is the cause of the thing's being. The efficient cause of the thing is extrinsic to it; whereas the formal cause is intrinsic. As formally caused by the essence, its being may be said to flow from the essence. "In this way every nature is essentially a being, because an essence is of its very notion a potency to being and formally demands being". This formal requirement is not enough to make anything be. An efficient cause has to make that formal causality actual. But in any production of being (even in creation), the agent has to function through the formal causality of the essence. That is the only way it can produce a finite being. "Although an essence does not include real being, it nevertheless does not exclude it. Nothingness, on the contrary, excludes real being".



Essence as Entitative Principle

Essence is one of the two entitative principles of a being: *Being and essence*. These constitute finite beings. Neither of the two is an in-itself. The origin of human knowledge lies in sensible things. All other knowable beings have to be represented by the mind in their light. Sensible things are known simultaneously in their essence by simple apprehension and in their being by judgment. Every other knowable object has to be represented as something that is. The two entitative principles admit no exception. Being exists as a nature in the first efficient cause of things, and as an act that is not nature in all other finite things. As an existential act it has to involve its own limitation, i.e., as an essence that is other than itself. In this way Being confers being upon a man, a mountain, or a star. What exists is not the existential act itself, but the limiting essence that has being in virtue of the existential act. The limitation is not a reduction to ‘nothing’ or a negative cutting off of being, but a positive thing like the man or the star. A limitation of Being is a particular being that exists.

Essence as the Principle of Limitation

When we ask about something ‘what it is’, we suppose that we know already that it is a certain *what*. In this way it differs from the whatness of all other beings. If it differs in this way from that which it is not, then beings possess Being not to its fullest extent, but only within determined limits that through which a being is that which it is, is its essence. Hence, essence is that through which a being is posited in a determined, limited manner of being. Essence implies a negation of Being. It is not a negation which suppresses the Being of a being and reduces it to nothing. But it is a negation which limits its Being and reduces it to a finite being. It is not total or absolute, but a partial and relative negation which refers to certain determinations and denies their presence in this Being. Such a relative negation is also a negative relation as it refers one being to all others and distinguishes it from them. A relative negation is a determined negation, determined by that which it refers. Hence, the finiteness is always and necessarily determined finiteness. We must conceive of essence as the principle of limitation and determination of a being. [Determination is precise specification or making a thing what it is.]

Kinds of Essence: Common and Individual

*Common essence* is the principle of limitation and determination of all the members of the same species, e.g., the essence of Man. *Individual essence* is the principle of unique determination of an individual, e.g., what makes John uniquely John.

**Check Your Progress**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1)    What are the characteristics of Being?

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2) What are the characteristics of Essence?

### 1.4 LET US SUM UP

In finite beings, there is an inseparable relation between Being and essence. Being is that which is in some way or something; whereas, essence is the principle of determination or limitation of Being into finite (limited) being. Being in itself is unlimited, infinite. The finite being has to be identical with Being; for Being is immanent in this finite being because this being *is*. This identity is not perfect because alongside *this* being, there are also other finite beings. Being lets itself be modified or limited, and according to the limitation the finite being participates in Being. Being, which transcends all modes, does not fully coincide with the *proper Being* of each being which is only in a limited way. The finite being is through *participation* in unqualified Being. To explain this participation, we must admit that within the finite being there is a distinction between its *proper Being* and the principle through which Being becomes its own limited Being, i.e., its own modifying and limiting essence. Being is the inner principle or ground of that which really is and through which beings are in themselves. Essence is the principle of determination which makes a thing what it fundamentally is. Essence, as the principle of determination, is also the principle of limitation; for a principle that determines limits. Limitation also implies negation. It is not a negation which suppresses the Being of a being and reduces it to nothing. But it is a negation which limits its Being and reduces it to a finite being.

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