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# UNIT 1    BEING AND ESSENCE

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## 1.0    OBJECTIVES

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The objective of this Unit is to familiarize the student with the closely related terms *being* and *essence*. The method we will be following is historical, because it is more correct to speak of the history of the meanings rather than of ‘the meaning’ of being and essence. The limitation of the Unit is that it concentrates mainly on the West.

By the end of this Unit you should be able to distinguish and identify at least four great periods in the history of the meanings of being and essence in the West.

- The ancient identification of being and essence;
- The medieval identification of being with *esse*;
- The breakdown of the medieval synthesis in the modern period;
- Contemporary efforts to go beyond both being and essence.

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## 1.1    INTRODUCTION

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Being is that which exists and it is unlimited in itself. But things are different in nature and limited by their essence. The principle of unlimitedness is being and the principle of limitation is essence. In this unit, we speak about the origin and development of the concept of being and essence in the history of philosophy.

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## 1.2    ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY: BEING AS ESSENCE

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The earliest Indian reflections on being may be found in hymn X, 129 of the *Rgveda*, which speaks of a mysterious ‘One’ as the originator of the universe, noting that then there was neither Being (*sat*) nor Not-Being (*asat*). *Sat*, derived from the infinitive *as*, to be, here means the manifestly existent, all creatures distinguishable by their form and name (*namarupa*), including gods; *asat* means the not yet differentiated material, the primal matter out of which names and forms emerge.

In the West, reflection on being achieved its first high point in the philosophy of Parmenides, which is characterized by an opposition between being and appearance,

and a clear option for being as stability and unity. What is real neither arises nor perishes, and this thinking continues to influence the subsequent Presocratic nature philosophers who, however, unlike Parmenides, do not conclude that the objects of our everyday experience are mere appearances.

Plato is the first in the West to have explicitly raised the question, What is being? The question is answered in *The Sophist* by accepting a Form or Idea of being, but also by distinguishing two forms of being: Ideas, which have their own Being, and particulars, which have Being only through participation. Like Parmenides, then, Forms or Ideas are stable and unchanging; unlike Parmenides, there is a plurality of Forms. Plato refers, in fact, to the Forms as *ousiai*. His *ousia* is the decisive formulation of *einai*, being a substantive derived from the feminine participle of *einai*. *Ousia* is that of which 'is' is properly predicated. It is the real and primary being (*ontos on*). It is that which something is as such: its whatness. Thus Plato equates being with Form or Idea. In contrast, the things of experience are merely imitations or images of the Ideas, and so, while they are not absolutely nothing, they do not have any immanent *ousia*.

Against Plato, Aristotle upholds the individual existent as the paragon of reality and calls it 'primary substance' (*prote ousia*), in opposition to 'secondary substance' which is merely conceptual. For him, the first substance is *hypostasis* or subject, because it is "that of which everything else is predicated, while it is itself not predicated of anything else." (*Metaphysics* Book 7, ch. 3.) Still, this term is not yet specialized and Aristotle uses it to mean all sorts of subject, substrata, supports, or subject-matter. Perhaps we could say that for Aristotle, *hypostasis* is, in material substances, the essence (*to ti en einai*) composed of matter and form, where form is that which makes matter into a substance. It is primarily the whatness of a thing, the essence, that makes a thing what it is. There is an equation in Aristotle between being (*ousia*) and essence.

Hellenistic philosophy repudiated both Platonic ideas and Aristotelian essences or forms. The Stoics held the view that only corporeal things exist, and that only such things can either affect or be affected by something. Since the soul, for example, can clearly be affected or affect, they drew the reverse conclusion that the soul itself is corporeal. The denial of beings beyond the perceptible world remains a fundamental position of Stoicism. The Church Fathers, on the other hand, have a concept of being that is quite distinct, deriving it from an interpretation of the "I am who am" of *Exodus* 3, 14. Thus Clement of Alexandria allowed that God can be named 'being,' in the sense of 'the real and only being,' who was, is and will be, and who undergoes no change. According to Gregory of Nazianzen also, 'being' is a name that first and foremost describes the divine essence. Since God as 'being' encompasses being as a whole, Gregory calls him, in a famous metaphor, "as it were an unending and limitless ocean of Being."

The reception of Greek philosophy in the Latin-speaking world encountered significant difficulties with the translation of important words. *To on* was rendered by the non-classical *ens*. Seneca coined the word *essentia* as a translation of *ousia*: just as *ousia* is the substantive of the Greek infinitive *einai*, *essentia* is the substantive of the Latin infinitive *esse*. This usage, however, did not become established: under the influence of Aristotle's *Categories*, *substantia* became the dominant translation of *ousia*. The terms *ousia*, *substantia* and *essentia* play an important role in the Trinitarian and Christological controversies. At the time of these controversies, their meanings were still floating and ambiguous, together with those of *prosopon* / *persona*, *hypostasis* / *subsistentia* / *subjectum* / *suppositum*, and *physis* / *natura*. In Greek, *prosopon*

was retaining its ancient meaning of mask or character, whereas in Latin its cognate *persona* was attaining the sense of *subjectum iuris*. Among the Greeks, it was *hypostasis* that was acquiring this meaning of *persona*, while its Latin cognate *substantia* only meant for the Latins essence (Gk. *ousia*) or substance or nature (Gk. *physis*), for which they also used *natura*. This led to imaginable confusion between Greek and Latin theologians. Finally, during the fourth century AD, it was agreed to say that Christ was, in Latin, one *persona* in two distinct *naturae* or *substantiae*, in Greek one *hypostasis* in two *physeis* or *ousiae*. Similarly, they declared that God is one Essence or Substance (*ousia* / *substantia*) in three persons (*hypostaseis* / *personae*). These developments are significant for the medieval Christian reflection on being and essence.

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### 1.3 THE MIDDLE AGES: BEING AS *ESSE*

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The Muslim philosopher Avicenna (Ibn Sina) initiated an important distinction between being and essence. One of his theses was that ‘being’ indicates ‘being-real’, while ‘essence’ indicates the Whatness of a being. Being is to be understood as the act of some particular being; it is not a property of its essence; and it is related to its essence as an accident, even though not a categorical one. On the other hand, the essence has its own value: it is indifferent to determinations such as universality or individuality, and mental or real ways of being, and can be thought of without them. So essence and being are distinct. This teaching about the accidentality of the Being of created beings was accepted by Algazel (Al Ghazali) and Moses Maimonides, but rejected vigorously by Averroes (Ibn Rushd).

Thomas Aquinas takes over Avicenna’s distinction of being and essence, but with Averroes rejects the accidentality of being. In fact, with him the act of being, which he refers to as *esse*, comes to occupy explicit primacy over essence understood as the Whatness of a being. Thus if Aristotle may be regarded as the champion of essence, Thomas is the champion of *esse*. Parmenides had established linguistic argument as an independent power that could challenge the evidence of the senses, thus making way for the distinction between sense and intellect. Plato had given pride of place to understanding when he insisted on the reality of a world of eternal Forms. Aristotle had systematized the distinction between sense and understanding by distinguishing between matter and form in the essence of a thing, or the essence that is the thing, the *ousia*. To Thomas, however, goes the credit of making systematic a further distinction between understanding and judgment. Thus where Aristotle was content to say that among sensible things, ‘that which is’ is either the essence or at least an essential, with Thomas being ceases to be identified with essence; it is now primarily the act of existence, or better, pure *esse*. Aristotle had, of course, a theory of judgment, but judging for him was the composition or division of concepts, not the absolute positing of what is true; thus he reduced judging to experiencing plus understanding. Thomas does tend to use Aristotelian language, but, with his superior grasp of the distinction between understanding and judging, he was able to acknowledge and emphasize the real distinction between essence and *esse*.

Thomas’ doctrine can be synthesized in the following manner. Being has two denotations: being pure and simple, and being qualified in some sense. A being pure and simple is that which is. A qualified being does not itself ‘be’; instead it refers in some way to an act of existence. Examples of qualified being are accidents, the intrinsic and constitutive principles of being, possible, and beings of reason. Examples of being without qualification are God, angels and material creatures. God is being as pure and

unrestricted act. Angels are beings composed of form and act. Material creatures are beings composed of potency (matter), form and act.

Hence essence also has three denotations. In God, essence is pure act itself. In angels, essence is form. In material creatures, essence is composed of potency and form. Form is related to matter as insight to sensible data. Essences are also divided into essences pure and simple, and essences qualified in some sense. An essence pure and simple is the essence of being pure and simple. An essence in a qualified sense is the essence of anything that pertains to a being pure and simple. *Esse* is the act of a being, the act of being, the act of an essence. In God, *esse* is pure act itself. In angels it is an act limited by form; in material creatures it is an act limited by essence composed of matter and form. There is a real, adequate, minor distinction between finite essence and contingent act of existence. There is a real, inadequate, minor distinction between a finite being and its essence. That which is, in other words, is not a finite essence, but a being composed of essence and act of existence. In God, being, essence and act of existence are the same. But in a creature, being pure and simple is indeed that which is; but it is by essence and act of existence that the creature is a being.

Substance has two denotations; further, it is understood in several ways. Substance is either first or second substance. Second substance is an abstraction, such as man or cow. First substance is a concrete reality such as this man or this cow. But this may be taken in two ways: first, as including accidents; second, as prescinding from accidents. Further, first substance can be conceived without accidents, (1) as composed of potency, form and act, in which case it is, as regards substance, a being pure and simple; (2) as composed of potency and form, in which case it is not a *being* pure and simple but an *essence* pure and simple.

The matter can be made clearer by noting that Plato has an analogy of form, Aristotle an analogy of substance, but Thomas alone an analogy of being. Platonic forms (*ta eide*) are posited on the analogy of universal concepts: they are eternal, immutable, subsistent, immaterial, intelligible, but not intelligent. Aristotelian substances (*ousiai*) do not correspond to concepts; they proceed instead from an analogy of the intelligent and the intelligible. Thus in material things they are the intelligible that is grasped in the sensible. In that which is immaterial, *ousia* or substance is both one who understands and what is understood; there is identity between the one understanding and what is understood. Material substances are known by an investigation of the formal cause. Separate substances cannot be known in this manner because they neither have senses nor are sensible things. So Aristotelian analogy proceeds to a conception of separate substances through the intelligent and the intelligible. Human intellect is moved to understand by the mediation of sensible data; separated intellects are immovable, they are not moved by anything, in them intelligible and intelligent and intellect are one and the same. As for Thomist analogy of being, its systematic root is the assertion that the object of intellect is unrestricted being or 'all things.' The intellect is in act or potency depending on its relation to universal being. Only God's intellect is purely and simply in act, because no created intellect is unrestricted being. An angelic intellect is always in act, but only with respect to certain intelligibles. Human intellect is merely potency in the genus of the intelligible; even after it has received a species, without a phantasm it understands nothing in act. Thus the Aristotelian doctrine is included in such a way as to be transformed. In material things, besides matter and form, there is also the act of existence. In separate substances, besides form there is also the act of existence. And beyond these there is God, who is subsistent act of existence itself, pure act. Thus Thomas proceeds by asking, not: What, analogically speaking, is a separate substance?

but: What, analogically speaking, is the act of existence, being, that which is? To this the answer is that being not only has a twofold denotation (being pure and simple, and being qualified in some sense), but also is twofold (being by its essence and being by participation) and is known in a twofold way (being quidditatively known, and being analogically known). The Thomist system simply and utterly transcends Aristotelian essentialism, for while it includes the Aristotelian doctrine, it adds to it another doctrine that is simply and utterly new, and it adds it in a systematic fashion.

We must note that such a systematic addition and transformation is possible only to the extent that, within the realm of sensible things, being does not denote the same thing as essence or essential. For if these denote the same thing, one will ask with Aristotle about material and immaterial beings, and answer with him through a science of material things and of separate substances. For if ‘being’ and ‘essence’ have the same denotation, the question ‘What is being?’ is none other than the question of what this, that, or the other essence is. Only if being adds something above and beyond the essential does the question of what being is make sense; and only then is this question answered by dividing being into being by its essence, and being by participation.

Thomas does not speak explicitly of a real distinction between *esse* and essence, but he does mean a non-mental difference between the two in the concrete existing thing. Opposition to the real distinction came from the Latin Averroists, the Dominicans and the Franciscans. The latter two groups, however, based themselves on a general and extrinsic reason: they objected to the use of Islamic and Aristotelian sources. The problem was brought sharply into focus by Giles of Rome, with his insistence not merely on the distinction but on a separation between essence and *esse*: without this, he said, there is no proof of creation, analogy, distinction of substance and accidents. Henry of Ghent countered with a rational distinction between essence and existence, and refused it a major role in philosophy and theology; he was joined in this later by Duns Scotus. But Thomas remains the most important protagonist of the real distinction.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) How is being understood in the ancient period of the West?

2) How is being understood in the medieval Western period?

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## 1.4 THE MODERN PERIOD: BREAKDOWN AND FERMENT

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The masterly sublation of Aristotle achieved by Thomas in his philosophy of *esse* soon suffered an eclipse and a breakdown, not only at the hands of his opponents but also at those of his own disciples and interpreters. Modern Western philosophy thus inherits not so much the Thomist synthesis as the breakdown represented by late Scholasticism. A. MacIntyre has even referred to modern rationalism the first cousin of late Scholasticism.

Descartes, in effort to give philosophy a fresh beginning, refuses to engage in a systematic ontology; still, his *Cogito* contains certain assumptions about existence. Being is first one's own existence, discovered with intuitive certainty in the performance of thinking; the existence of things of the outside world is guaranteed ultimately only through the truthfulness of God. Again, Descartes insisted on a strict distinction between essence and existence. Essence, however, is not so much the Whatness of a thing or its definition, but the principal attribute of a substance. Thus extension is the essence of corporeal substance, and thought the essence of thinking substance. As for existence, Descartes understands it as a perfection; he can thus say that it belongs necessarily to the nature of the most perfect being, God.

Hobbes rejects all metaphysical concepts such as essence and entity as futile and superfluous, and makes a break with Aristotle when he holds that definitions are of names, not of things. An essence is merely that accident by which we give a name to a body. For Locke, only corporeal things are real, and their basic determination is the 'solidity' which is attained through the sense of touch. Everything that exists is either an idea in us or a real being outside us. In contrast to Hobbes, Locke does admit a real essence that is the bearer of qualities, but this real essence is mostly unknown to us. It is the colour, weight, etc. of a thing which gives it a right to a particular name, and that is its nominal essence. Hume admits that all our ideas are associated with the "most perfect idea and assurance of being." Still, the reality outside us corresponding to perception is ultimately only an object of belief. As for 'substance,' he rejects it as an 'unintelligible chimera.' One consequence of such thinking is that real essence becomes unimportant, and philosophy becomes a study of meanings.

In Leibniz we find once again the effort to work out an ontology, but now it is not so much the science of *esse* as of the most universal concepts such as something, nothing, thinkable, being, and thing. The idea of being is innate in all peoples, but we come to it by the Cartesian way of self-experience and distinct ideas. Being is thus what can be clearly grasped, and the existent can be perceived through inner or outer sense. As for essence, it is basically the possibility of what one proposes; it is eternal because it is a pure possibility. This essence as possibility contains the act of existing. For Wolff, essence is that in which is found the ground of all the rest that belongs to a thing: one knows the essence of a thing when one understands how it is determined in its type. True, essence here appears to be merely a possibility, but since possibility is something necessary, the essence of a thing consists in this, that it is a definite type of possibility; thus essence is necessary, eternal, unchanging.

Given Kant's Copernican Revolution, the term Being plays a minor role in his philosophy. The place of traditional ontology is taken by the Transcendental Analytic, which replaces Being and beings with the pure ideas of reason as the spontaneous conditions of possibility of experience. However, in the special context of the ontological proof of

the existence of God, the concept of Being does play a central role. In this context, Kant distinguishes two meanings of Being: (1) if something is posited as a characteristic of a thing, Being means the positing of this relationship; (2) if the thing is posited in and for itself, then Being means the absolute positing of the thing, or Dasein. The main point in this distinction is that Being in the sense of Dasein is not a predicate or determination of things. Thus the statement 'God exists' brings to the concept God no new property. The real contains nothing more than the merely possible. The ontological proof of God's existence fails because existence cannot be derived from an analysis of transcendental ideals. Being as posited can never be affirmed *a priori*, because our awareness of existence is derived wholly and completely from the unification of experience. As for essence, Kant distinguishes between the logical essence and the real essence or nature of a thing. Both refer to inner principles of things: logical essence is the principle of all the possibilities of a thing, while real essence or nature is the principle of what belongs to the Dasein of a thing. Thus geometrical figures have a logical essence, but no nature. Kant holds that, while we can easily understand the logical essences of a thing, we cannot see the real or natural essence of a thing as a whole. However, he holds that it is necessary neither for the natural sciences nor for metaphysics to know the entire real essence of a thing.

The doctrine of Being is the subject of Hegel's Logic. Together with the doctrine of essence, the doctrine of being constitutes the 'objective Logic' that takes the place of traditional ontology. The Logic has its starting point in 'pure knowing.' Pure knowing presents itself as the 'undifferentiated.' In its non-differentiatedness, pure knowing is 'simple unmediatedness,' pure Being. As pure knowing should be called nothing but knowing as such, so pure Being must be called nothing but Being itself. Being is therefore the non-determinate, the unmediated, empty intuition and empty thinking. In this total non-determinateness it is therefore Nothing; it is simply identity with itself. However, insofar as Being is transformed into Nothing, a movement has taken place, and a new moment appears, which is Becoming. The unification of Being and Nothing in Becoming produces Dasein, and there arises 'determination as such.' Thus in its attempt to know what Being is in and for itself, knowing cannot remain with the unmediatedness of Being; it enters into itself, and awaits the emergence of the Truth of Being. This emerges in the first negation of Being, in essence. Being in its truth reveals itself as having become Nothing – it emerges as Appearance. Thus one arrives at the second great step of ontology, to the Logic of Essence. Insofar as Appearance appears not as the manifestation of another, but as itself, there emerges Reflexion, the appearance of essence in itself. In the presentation of essences, Reflexion reaches determination. With the Logic of Essence and the doctrine of concepts derived from it, the Logic of Being is abandoned; yet the movement of knowing leads back to Being. On the highest level of knowing, which is the Idea, there is pure unity. The Idea is simple relation to itself and therefore pure Being, but through the mediation of the concept it is Being brought to fulfilment, Being as the concrete and as totality. Hegel's Logic can therefore be understood as a universal doctrine of Being, as the explicitation of the meaning of 'is'. Since, however, primordial reality is the Absolute Idea, and since Hegel tends to equate Being with essence, we may say that Hegel returns in a sense to Aristotle.

Kierkegaard reacted against the absence of place for the individual and the particular existent in Hegel's dialectic, but 'existence' has a different meaning for him: it means the manner of being proper to a human being. The 'ex' in existence is not the emergence of beings from their causes and from prior nothingness, but the intentionality of consciousness going towards something different from itself. For Dilthey, the concept of essence belongs to the life-categories that, in contrast to the formal categories of

thought, express a fact of life contained in the inner experience of the subject. Since however life as a whole is ultimately not to be grounded through concepts, the concept of essence contains a dark and non-groundable core that we cannot discipline through any kind of logic. Instead, there is in each individual a centre of his essence and of the meaning of his existence, which we can understand through the consciousness of our relationship with him. As for Nietzsche, he completely rejects the distinction between essence and appearance. For him, the 'Outer' is the 'Inner', and 'appearances' are not masks of an unknown X but rather Manifestation, Power and Life itself. Yet in the end, manifestation almost always becomes essence and functions as essence.

Husserl's philosophy is a *sui generis* return to the immutability of essences. For Husserl, essence means above all that which can be found in the ownmost being of an individual as its What, that can be empirically experienced through individual intuition. What is intuited is the pure essence or *eidos*. To every individual object belongs an 'essential state,' and to each essence correspond possible individuals as its factual particularizations.

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## 1.5 THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD: BEYOND BEING AND ESSENCE

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The great re-emergence of the question of Being takes place, of course, in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger was one of Husserl's most brilliant pupils. His originality consists in adopting the phenomenology of Husserl and applying it, not to the rarefied world of pure essences, but to the factual world in all its temporality and concreteness. Heidegger's whole philosophy can be understood as concerned with the question of Being. *Being and Time* (1927) tries to explicate the meaning of Being by examining a particular being, *Dasein*. The peculiarity of *Dasein* over other beings consists in the fact that the Being of this being is to be concerned about Being. That *Dasein* comports itself towards Being in this way gives its Being the character of Existence. *Dasein* essences thus, that it is the 'there,' the lighting up of Being. This Being of the There, and only this, has the basic relation of Ex-sisting, which means ecstatic dwelling in the truth of Being. Heidegger places the word 'essence' in inverted commas and verbalizes it, so that it means the Ek-stasy of *Dasein*. As for essence in the sense of a generic and universal concept, Heidegger calls it the 'trivial' and 'unessential essence,' in contrast to the 'essential essence' that consists in what a being really is. Understood as a verb, essence (*wesen*) means 'to last' (*währen*). The enduring of that which, having come into unconcealment, remains there, is the 'Presence' (*Anwesen*). The structures of Existence are the existentials, and together these existentials form the existentiality of *Dasein*. Further, since *Dasein* is always and primordially being-in-the-world, its meaning is concealed there. As being-in-the-world, *Dasein* begins to understand itself when it grasps itself in its temporality. In the second part of *Being and Time*, Heidegger had planned to show the structures of *Dasein* as modes of temporality. But this part never appeared, and Heidegger left unanswered the question whether temporality is the path to the meaning of Being. His 'Turn' tries to think Being without thinking back to a grounding of Being on beings. According to Heidegger, the history of metaphysics has concentrated on beings and so has missed the 'Truth of *Seyns*' that 'essences' as the Hidden. When he uses expressions such as "A being is. Being essences," he is trying to avoid encapsulating Being in categories and in the language of presence-metaphysics. He also tries, with the help of a 'silent teaching' instead of a logic, to indicate that one can never directly speak of Being itself, because it only essences in silence. In later writings he tries, with the help of a *strikeout* (*Sein*), to indicate the way



in which the new thinking that does not articulate itself in statements dissolves Being. The concept of Being has thus freed itself from all the coordinates of ontology. Interestingly, however, the late writings tend to think of Being as a power possessing the attributes of personality: Being ‘speaks to’, ‘denies,’ ‘withdraws.’ The high point in Heidegger’s mythicization of Being comes when it becomes a cipher of salvation philosophy for ‘the select few of the future,’ for those who await ‘the distancing and nearing of the last god.’

Taking off from Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, Sartre addresses the Being question. Against Kant’s separation of the Thing-in-itself and Appearance, Sartre insists on the self-manifestation of appearance; but this is not an abandonment of ‘transphenomenality’. Rather, it means: the Being of appearance is distinct from appearance; it is the condition for the unveiling of being, but is not itself unveiled. The ontological difference presents itself thus as the difference between the phenomenon of Being and the Being of the phenomenon. The question about the Being of the phenomenon turns to consciousness. In so far as it is always consciousness of something, consciousness points away from itself to the thing in itself. Between the being in itself and consciousness, whose way of Being is to be for itself, there is a radical gap: while the in itself is an undifferentiated affirmation of itself, the Being of the for-itself lies in the annihilation of the for-itself – its Being is never given, it is always deferred, is always in question and longs for Being, always conceives itself and shatters in the process. At the same time the in-itself and the for-itself belong together. This *a priori* unity marks the concrete relationships of human beings in their Being in the world. Sartre’s ontology explicates the human condition with emphasis on the consideration of existence with others and with special attention to the human body.

The groundswell against being and essence that we have noticed since the inception of modern philosophy builds up into a wave with Nietzsche and Heidegger, and crashes down with the movement known as Postmodernism. Derrida, one of the stellar figures of this movement, describes the Western intellectual tradition as “a search for a transcendental being that serves as the origin or guarantor of meaning.” Such an attempt to ground meaning relations in an instance that lies outside all relationality was referred to by Heidegger as logocentrism. Derrida argues that the whole philosophical enterprise is *essentially* logocentric, and that this is a paradigm inherited from Judaism and Hellenism. He further describes logocentrism as phallocratic, patriarchal and masculinist. He was vigorous in pointing out and highlighting “certain deeply hidden philosophical presuppositions and prejudices in Western culture,” arguing that the whole philosophical tradition rests on arbitrary dichotomous categories such as sacred/profane, sign/signifier, mind/body, and that any text contains implicit hierarchies, “by which an order is imposed on reality and by which a subtle repression is exercised, as these hierarchies exclude, subordinate, and hide the various potential meanings. Derrida refers to his procedure for uncovering and unsettling these dichotomies as deconstruction.”

**Check Your Progress II**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is the fate of being and essence in the modern Western period?

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2) How is being understood in the contemporary period?

## 1.6 LET US SUM UP

Where Parmenides used various forms of the word *einai* to speak of Being that is stable, unchanging and one, Plato coined the word *ousia* to characterize his eternal Forms, in contrast to which material things are mere imitations. Aristotle instead upholds the individual existent as the paragon of reality, first *ousia*. These may be either pure immaterial essences, or else mixed essences composed of matter and form.

Where Aristotle had an analogy of substance, Thomas Aquinas worked out an analogy of *esse*: God is the pure *esse*; angels are substances composed of act of existence and essence; material things are composed of act of existence and essence, but the essence is itself composed of form and matter. Thus Being for Thomas is primarily *esse* rather than essence.

This higher synthesis and transformation of Aristotle is broken up in various ways in the modern period. The empiricists regard essences as merely nominal. Kant recognizes that existence is not a predicate, but relegates Being to a minor role. Hegel ignores *esse* to construct a Logic of Being and a Logic of Essence culminating in the Absolute Idea. In reaction to his neglect of the particular and the individual, Kierkegaard works out a new meaning of existence as the manner of being proper to human beings.

Heidegger works out a phenomenology of factual existence, seeks the Being of meaning, and raises anew the question of Being. However, he abandons his early efforts when he opts for a poetic recognition of the Truth of Being that ‘essences’ in silence. Derrida is representative of postmodernism when he proscribes all philosophy as logocentric, and conceives of his own task as one of deconstruction of the subtle violence of philosophy and of civilization. Postmodernism therefore seeks to get beyond the thinking of Being and essence/*logos* that has characterized the history of the West.

## 1.7 KEY WORDS

- Einai*

:

Gk. infinitive ‘to be.’
- Ousia, ousiai*

:

Gk. substantive derived from *einai*, variously translated as being or substance.
- To ti en einai*

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Gk. expression coined by Aristotle, usually translated as essence.
- Esse*

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Lat. infinitive ‘to be’; act of existence.

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## 1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) In the ancient period of the West, being tends to be identified with essence in the sense of the Whatness of things, and essences are considered stable and unchanging in themselves. Parmenides regarded only the stable and unchanging as being, and further regarded being as one. Plato preserved this emphasis on stability when he spoke of a world of eternal, unchanging Forms, but admitted a plurality of such Forms or *ousiai*. Aristotle extended the word *ousia* also to material things, and indeed exalted the individual existent as the prototypical substance or *ousia*. Still, even for him *ousia* or being is largely its essence, though in material things the essence consists not only of form but also of matter.
- 2) In the medieval period of the West a distinction emerges between essence and existence. Especially for Thomas Aquinas, being is primarily not essence but act of existence, or *esse*. He establishes an analogy of *esse*: God who is pure *esse*; angels who are beings composed of form and act of existence; and material things that are composed of essence and existence, and whose essence is further composed of matter and form.

### Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) In the modern period, Hobbes and Locke begin insisting that essences or definitions are of names rather than of things. Kant does recognize that existence is not a predicate, but relegates Being to a minor role as compared to the pure ideas of reason. Hegel swallows up both *esse* and movement into the dialectic of the Absolute Idea. In reaction, Kierkegaard worked out a new meaning of existence as the manner of being proper to the human being, and Nietzsche refused to acknowledge any difference between essence and appearance. Thus the modern period represents a breakdown of the synthesis achieved by Thomas Aquinas.

**Metaphysical Structure of  
Finite Being**

- 2) The contemporary period may be regarded as an ongoing effort to get beyond both Being and *logos*. Taking inspiration from Husserl, Heidegger creates a phenomenology of factual existence and raises anew the question of Being. This he does by examining Dasein, which is that being whose Being is to be concerned about Being. Eventually he abandons this attempt and opts for a poetic recognition of the Truth of Being that 'essences' in silence. Derrida goes one step further when he characterises the whole history of philosophy in the West, including that of Heidegger, as logocentric, and proposes to replace it by deconstruction of its violent and repressive dichotomies.