# UNIT 4 BEINGAND THE PROBLEM OF ONE AND MANY

#### **Contents**

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Early Western Perspectives
- 4.3 Early Indian Perspectives
- 4.4 Being as One in Many
- 4.5 Finite Being as One in Many
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Further Readings and References

# 4.0 OBJECTIVES

There is an inseparable relation between One and many. 'Many' cannot be without 'One.' The 'many' has its foundation in the 'One,' which sustains and supports the many. In the same way, the One never remains in isolation apart from 'the many.' It is because the One by its very nature is 'relational,' social, and self-giving by allowing itself to be limited in the finite other so that the finite is made possible by the infinite One. In this Unit a humble attempt is made to:

- Explain the problem of one and many from the philosophical perspectives of the Western and Indian philosophers
- Establish that Being is One in Many

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

A discussion on the 'problem of one and many' has been on the increase throughout the centuries. It has been a much debated question both in the East and in the West. It was first posed in the West by the pre-Socratic philosophers. The problem is implicitly present in the discussion of Heraclitus (c. 540-480 BCE) and has its explicit starting point in the fragments of Parmenides' poem which had also much influenced the metaphysical thinking of Plato (428-348 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE). Lively debates on the problem are also predominantly present in the philosophies of the East, especially in the Vedic, Vedantic, and non-Vedic systems of India. In this article we examine only the most important origins of Western and Indian philosophies on the issue that definitely influenced the later thinkers of various schools of thought, so as to arrive at a fair synthesis of the same.

#### 4.2 EARLY WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

*Heraclitus*: For Heraclitus, the fundamental thought is that the one universe is in a state of ceaseless change. 'One cannot step twice into the same river,' for other waters are ever flowing on. To signalize the notion of incessant activity Heraclitus chooses as his first principle the ever-living fire which is the vital principle in

Being and the Problem of One and Many

the organism and the essence of the soul. The fire of Heraclitus is not the abiding substratum of his predecessors, but that which is constantly being transformed into other things. The primal unity itself is in constant motion and change. Its creation is destruction and its destruction is creation. This view is opposed by Parmenides who interprets reality to be permanent without any change.

Parmenides: Parmenides, the metaphysician of the Eleatic school, challenges Heraclitus' teaching that everything changes? that fire becomes water, and water earth, and earth fire?that things first are and then are not. How can a thing both be and not be? How can anyone think such a contradiction? To say that it can, is to say that something is and something is not. Or, if Being has *become*, it must either have come from non-Being or from Being. If from non-Being, it has come from nothing, which is impossible; if from Being, then it has come from itself and is identical with itself, and thus has always been. Then, it is evident that from Being only being can come, that whatever is always has been and always will be, that everything remains what it is. Hence, there can be only one eternal, unchangeable Being.

Plato (428-348): The idea or form comprehends or holds together the essential qualities common to many particulars. The essence of things consists in their universal forms. The ideas or forms are not mere thoughts in the minds of humans or even in the mind of God (the divine thought is itself directed toward them). Plato conceives them as existing in and for themselves, possessing substantiality? i.e., they are substances? real or substantial forms, the original, eternal transcendent archetypes of things, existing prior to things and apart from them, and thus uninfluenced by the changes to which they are subject. The particular objects of perception are imperfect copies or reflections of the eternal patterns. Particulars may come and go, but the idea or form goes on forever. Humans may come and go, but the human-type is eternal. There are many particular objects or copies, but there is only one idea of class of things. The variety and diversity of independent forms or ideas is endless.

Aristotle (384-322): For him, metaphysics is the First Philosophy that deals with the Unmoved Mover. The Unmoved Mover is the first being or first substance. As the Unmoved Mover is the first, the philosophy which deals with this kind of being is the First Philosophy. Since God is the first being who is studied in the first philosophy, it is also called theology. In other words, according to Aristotle, metaphysics is the first philosophy and the science of being as being. It is the science of substance, especially of the first substance, of the First Cause, which is immovable, eternal, independent, and without matter, i.e., God. Thus, first philosophy or ontology is at the same time theology. The object of metaphysics is all beings – visible and invisible. It investigates all beings in so far as they are beings – the totality of beings and all particular domains of beings.

# 4.3 EARLY INDIAN PERSPECTIVES

In India, the problem of one and many is expressed through a rich variety of thoughts and practices that have developed over more than three thousand years. There is no single Indian view on the problem, but rather a plurality of ways of understanding and interpreting reality as reflected in the *Vedas*, and particularly in the classical systems of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The problem becomes thematic at various levels and in different contexts, in debates concerning

the status of certain concepts as the soul, God, substances, universals, time, change, permanence/impermanence, etc.

When worship was accorded to any of the Vedic deities, the worshippers tended to make that deity the supreme one, having all the attributes of a monotheistic deity, of whom all others were forms or manifestations. This is known as henotheism, distinct from monotheism. Of course, these synthesizing processes, classification of gods, simplification of divine attributes and powers are all evidences of the problem of one and many. The Vedic Indians were sufficiently logical to realize that the attributes of creation and ruling of the world could be granted only to one being, namely, *Prajapati*, the Lord of creatures, *Vsva-karman*, the world-maker. Thus, the logic of religious faith asserted itself in favour of religious monotheism and metaphysical monism. The monistic emphasis led the Vedic thinkers to look upon the Vedic deities as different names of the One universal Godhead. The real that lies behind the tide of temporal change is One, spoken of in different ways. The One pervades all things just as air or ether (*akasa*) pervades the universe. The One animates the world just as the life-breath (*prana*) animates the human body.

The Vedic seers did not stop with a mythological view of Reality. They did not rest content until they had a vision of the unlimited Being (*Tadekam*). The hymn where the unlimited Being appears is the *Nasadiya-sukta* which has been praised as containing 'the flower of Indian thought.' This hymn is the quintessence of Indian metaphysics. All things are traced to one principle. Opposites like being and non-being, life and death, and night and day, are shown to be the self-unfolding of that 'One.'

Though the Upanisads do not work out a logically coherent system of the problem of one and many, they give us a few fundamental doctrines which are truly metaphysical: atman and Brahman. The term atman' was used in the Rgveda to denote the unborn part or the immaterial soul of human. Atman is the essence or ultimate reality of anything. The atman is the changeless principle behind the changing factors in human. This changeless aspect of human can be discovered only after a process of introspection which helps us transcend phenomenal aspects to reach the inner reality of atman. The word 'Brahman' is derived from the root 'Brh' which means to grow, to evolve. In the beginning it meant sacrifice, then prayer, and then it acquired its present meaning of ultimate reality. It is the ultimate cause of the universe which spontaneously bursts forth as nature and soul. Thus, Brahman transcends all, and yet underlies all as their background. The lower is transformed to the higher. Brahman is the immanent inner controller of all (antaryamin) and the self of all (sarva-bhutantaratma). As all spokes are contained in the axle and the wheel, so all beings are contained in *Brahman*. In the early *Upanisads*, *Brahman* stands for the superpersonal ground of the cosmos (objective) and *atman* is the principle of individual consciousness (subjective). But further thinking about the Unity of the Ultimate Reality, the One without a second, compelled the Upanisadic seers to resume that there cannot be a distinction between the essence or inner reality of the cosmos the Brahman and the inner reality of human the atman because Brahman cannot be taken into parts, and because the Absolute Consciousness cannot be thought of as being in any way other than the consciousness seen in the individual humans.

### 4.4 BEING AS ONE IN MANY

The problem of one and many is fundamental to human experience. Both poles seem to be equiprimordial to any intelligent awareness. 'The many' is inescapable for any experience which is spatio-temporal in its form, consisting in the manifold sensations that are spread out in space and that succeed one another in time. But to a human experience there also belongs (from the beginning) a unity, which allows the manifold items in it to be ordered and related among themselves; if this did not happen, there would be only a chaotic flux of impressions comparable to the flux which briefly passes through consciousness when we are overcome by dizziness or are about to lose consciousness. Is this unity of experience imposed entirely by the human mind giving an illusion of unity? That might be the Kantian epistemology in which it is the human mind which imposes unity upon the given forms of space and time by unifying the spatio-temporal data brought together under the categories of the Understanding in the unity of apperception. However, it would be impossible for the mind to impose a unity on the manifold sensations unless the conditions for such a unity were already there in the sensations themselves. If the flux of sensations were endlessly varied, we could never emerge from the state of dizziness, leaving us helpless to construct any kind of unity. But in fact, the same sensations keep coming back, and we are able to recognize them. It is the repetition, the recurrence of what has been, that makes possible the construction of a unified experience; this repetition lies in the given, the raw data of experience. Unity then is not a creation of the human mind, but a discovery of what has already been there, a discovery which is never complete.

There has also been in many individuals and schools of thought, a metaphysical awareness of this discovery of the underlying unity of all things. Such persons and schools have been seized of an awareness of a single Reality embracing all the manifestations of the manifold in itself and expressing itself in them. The metaphysical vision of an all-embracing unity has found expression in various monistic philosophies. The most illustrious representative philosopher of monism in ancient Greece was Parmenides. For him, reality is one and unchanging. That which changes is that which is not, and thus, unreality. The thought of Parmenides may be compared with that of Sankara. For him too, there is one unchanging reality, Brahman.

But from the earliest times there have been also philosophers who are openly pluralist. In ancient Greece, the priority of the multiple and the changing over the one has usually been ascribed to Heraclitus. But the typical pluralist philosophy has also been empiricist, in contrast to the rationalistic approach of monism, evident in modern and contemporary times reaching its most extreme form in Nietzsche and the postmodernists who championed pluralism and contingency. For them, there is no beginning, no end, and no absolute centre, but just the endless proliferation of contingent occasions. This view lies at the opposite extreme of Parmenides, Sankara, and the like.

Perhaps it is difficult to find anywhere, a thoroughgoing monism or pluralism. Most advocates of monism have thought of the One implying at least some sort of differentiation in itself. They are in tacit agreement with Radhakrishnan's view that the One is so far from being empty that it is characterized by fullness and that it surpasses comprehension. At the other extreme, is it possible to find a

thoroughgoing pluralism? Here even Nietzsche, who denied that there is either beginning, or end, or middle, nonetheless taught a doctrine of eternal recurrence. Thus, we have to conclude that the extreme forms, both of monism and of pluralism, are untenable. In the words of John Macquarrie, "The highest unity is that which already conceals within itself the richest diversity, while sheer diversity devoid of anything unifying is unthinkable. The one and the many do not stand in stark opposition to each other, for each implies the other." But how do they imply each other? The question of their mutual implication calls for further ontological analysis. The philosophical positions of monism, dualism, and of radical pluralism - all depend upon the ontological solution offered to the problem of one and many. But how can Being be *identical and diverse* at the same time?

In reality, monism, dualism, and pluralism, are extreme positions that create the illusion of solutions to the problem of one and many, which can be briefly explained in this way: Every being belongs to Being. Being reveals itself as an absolute everywhere. Every finite being is a whole being, a complete being; yet, it is not the whole of Being. For it does not contain all reality, since there are beings outside of it. A particular being participates in Being. The particular being that participates in Being is a complete being, a subsistent whole, unlike a part which is not a complete whole. The particular being, which is limited, is an imperfect being. It does not contain other particular beings, nor does it possess their perfection. Hence, it does not contain all perfection. Consequently, it is imperfect. It does not mean that it is unfinished in itself. The perfection of every particular being belongs itself wholly to Being, and by that token it is to be distinguished from every other being. In this way, Being possesses an absolute character. It is not opposed to anything. Consequently, it penetrates and envelops everything. Nevertheless, Being manifests some relativity, since the real is broken up into multiple unities which participate in Being. In other words, the participation of beings in Being is an undeniable fact. But how can we explain the fact that the distinct beings in Being preserve their autonomy? This is the fundamental metaphysical problem of one and many that calls for fresh attempts aiming at a solution. Being as one-in-many can be the result of such an attempt: Being is one: being is that which is in some way. Insofar as it is in some way, it is one. Being is many: being is that which is in some way. Insofar as being is in some way, each being is in its own way. Insofar as each being is in its own way, all beings are in their own ways. When all beings are in their own ways, there would be a plurality of beings that are many. In this sense, being is many. Being is one-in-many: being is that which is in some way. Insofar as being is in some way, it is one. However, each being is in its own way. Insofar as each being is in its own way, all beings are in their own ways, which are many. In other words, being which is in some way is also in its own way. Being is in beings, i.e., one is in many. Therefore, being is one-in-many.

## 4.5 FINITE BEING AS ONE IN MANY

Action as One in Many: For Blondel, action is a complex term of one in many that stands for the entire human experience conceived within the framework of human's basic needs and tendencies. It is the activity of the whole human, the synthesis of thought, will, and being itself. The greater and the nobler is human's activity, the greater and the nobler is one's action. Action is the most universal and unavoidable fact in human life. It is also a personal obligation that may

Being and the Problem of One and Many

demand a hard choice, a sacrifice, and even death (even suicide itself is an act). In other words, to refuse to choose is to make a choice. One always wills something; for otherwise one's act of willing would be a purely negative one. Now the minimum object we can assign to the will, after it has been proved that it is impossible for the will not to will, is to will nothing or nothingness (le *néant*). But is it possible to will nothing or to make nothingness, i.e., non-being, the term of our act of willing? Evidently not, because a negation is only conceivable in terms of an affirmation. Every negation implies an affirmation of something. Thus the human will always tends towards something or Being which underlies, penetrates, transforms, and unifies every action composed of two elements: exercise and determination. Exercise is the inner element of the operation which accounts for its taking place. Determination is the inner element of the operation which specifies or distinguishes the operation from other operations. Here, action consists of exercise and determination; action is in the elements of the action. The One action is in its many elements. Thus, the One action is in many actions.

We know well that a finite being is as structured as one's operation is. "As the operation is, so the being is". The operation is composed of exercise and determination – a one in many. Hence a finite being (person) must also be composed – a one in many. The finite being is composed of 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.

Being in Essence: 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 unlimited Being. For, unlimited Being transcends *this* particular Being. The immanent Being is a modified, finite, or 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 unlimited Being into a limited being this and nothing else. Whatever essence it 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 also has its modifying capacity. Hence, Being lets itself be modified or limited, and according to the limitation the finite being participates in unlimited Being. The unlimited 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 unlimited 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 unlimited Being points to a ground which is transcendent not only relatively to finite beings but absolutely. This One, Absolute Ground of beings is in essence. The One is in many.

Being as the Principle of 'Unlimitation' of Beings: Should something possess no Being, 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. It is the principle of perfection or unlimitation of all beings. Being is the inner principle or universal ground of that which really is and through which beings are in themselves.

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. Essence is that through which a being is posited in a determined, limited manner of being. Of course, 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, determined by Being which is present in every finite being.

**Substance in Accidents:** Finite beings are composed of a relatively permanent principle, which remains primarily the same throughout secondary changes and secondary principles. These principles may come and go without producing a change in the primary mode of being. The relatively permanent principle is called 'substance' and secondary principles are called 'accidents'. The notions of 'substance' and 'accident' may be acquired from the analysis of an external experience. For instance, our external senses reveal to us an unripe orange as a concrete whole which is extended in space, green coloured, sour, etc. The intellect conceives the qualities which may come and go as determinations which affect something underneath these changes and is modified by them. The difference between the determinations and their subject is expressed by the notions 'accidents' and 'substance' which correspond to a reality existing in the extramental world. Thus we may interpret substance as the being-in-itself of a finite essence which is the basic inner principle of permanence or continuity of that being which becomes. A being is originally constituted by its act of existing and essence. It is posited as a limited but a real being which exists in itself autonomously as a substance. It is Being-in-itself and not in another. Accident, on the other hand, is that which is not in itself but in another. It is a mode of being, but not autonomous. It does not exist in itself, but in another. It is whatever is added in anyway to another determined in its being. There is no accident which is not permeated and penetrated by substance, which sustains and supports them. The *one* substance is there *in many* accidents.

Being and the Problem of One and Many

**Form in Matter**: All material beings possess a principle of materiality. It is not a being at all but a principle of material beings as such. Hence it cannot be known scientifically (empirically) but metaphysically. This principle of materiality is prime matter. It is the common substantial principle found in all material bodies. It is wholly without determinateness in itself. It cannot exist itself. It is substantial, but an incomplete substantial principle. It requires another substantial principle to exist, or rather to give it existence in a determinate body. The other substantial principle (with the exception of the human soul) is also an incomplete substantial principle. The prime matter is the determinable element and the substantial form is the determining element. It is also pure potentiality as it is a pure capacity for existence in a material body. It is a capacity which must be filled up, determined, and made into the only existible body by a substantial principle other than itself. Since the result of the union of this determining principle with prime matter is a single bodily substance, the union itself must be a substantial union, the substantial fusing of two substantial principles into an actuality which is a third thing. This third thing is neither prime matter alone nor substantial form alone, but an existing body of a specific kind. It is that which makes any body a body, not actively but passively receiving the impress and union of the substantial form. For the whole character of prime matter is its passivity, its inertness, its indifference to become this particular kind of body rather than another, in a word, its indeterminateness, its *potentiality*. In this way we can affirm the classical Aristotelian assertion: 'Prime matter is that constitutive principle of corporal substance which of itself is quite indeterminate and hence can be determined to form corporeal substance.'

To illustrate the various senses in which the term *form* is used we shall consider a few instances of its use: Form is frequently used as a synonym for outline or shape. We speak of the oval form of a race-course, of the symmetrical form of a drawing. It also means a plan or program, a record, or a form-sheet to be filled. It is often used for *good condition*, and a golfer is said to be 'in form' or 'at the top of his form'. The adjective of form (i.e., formal) is often employed to indicate a certain dignity, or a certain decorum invoking precise details of dress or conduct. Thus we speak of a 'formal dress', 'formal occasion', 'formal introduction', etc. To a philosopher, form may mean that which determines a thing, sets it in its being, in its essence, in its substance, in its accidents, in its actuality. Any determining element is a being in form. When it is spoken of as corporeal substance the term refers to *substantial form* which makes a bodily substance an existing reality (actuality). It is the substantial form of human which makes the one bodily being a human being. That which sets and determines a substance in its actual being, and makes it a substance of this precise kind or essential nature, is its substantial form. Matter is there in every finite material substantial form. Matter is in form. One material principle (prime matter) is there in every material substantial form. One is in many.

Act in Potency: The term 'Act' comes from the Latin root 'Actus' which means an entity of whatever kind, which perfects and determines a thing in its being or perfection itself. It includes the power or faculty, operations of the faculty, accidents, essence, substance, form, and act of existing. Whatever a being has or is in a positive manner is an act. It is perfection itself. There are as many kinds of acts as there are kinds of 'being'; for every being as such is a perfection. Potency comes from the Latin root 'potentia' which means power. Potency is the capacity for act. It is the capacity or aptitude in reference to something which a being is not or has not, but which it can be or can receive. For example, hydrogen has the

'act' of hydrogen, and oxygen has the 'act' of oxygen; but both have the 'potency' of water. They are actually hydrogen and oxygen but 'potentially' water. Water on the other hand, is actually water; but it is potentially hydrogen and oxygen, since the water has the aptitude to be resolved into them. There are two main kinds of potency: Active Potency and Passive Potency. Active potency is the capacity to communicate act or perfection to another. It is a power of action such as the power of hearing. Since such a power in itself already confers certain perfection upon its subject, it is an act with respect to its subject. Hence it may also be called first act. *Passive potency* is the capacity to receive act or perfection from another, e.g., a child has the capacity for acquiring knowledge from parents and teachers. There are two kinds of Passive potency: Determinate Passive Potency and Indeterminate Passive Potency. Determinate passive potency is that which contains an act and is in potency to some further act, e.g., substance for accidents or the complete essence for the act of existing. *Indeterminate passive* potency is the principle of an act, but which itself contains no act. It is pure potency, e.g., prime matter. Act is there in every material finite being which is in potency. The One act is there in several potencies that a material finite being possesses.

We have already seen action and finite being as one in many. If finite being is one in many, unlimited Being – from which the finite being proceeds and in which every finite being is – should also be one in many.

Check Your Progress							
Note: use the space provided for your Answers.							
1) What are the early perspectives on the problem of one and many ( and Western)?							
2)	Establish that Being is one in many.						

### 4.6 LET US SUM UP

In reality monism, dualism, and pluralism, are extreme positions that create the illusion of solutions to the problem of one and many which can be briefly explained in this way: Every being belongs to Being. Everywhere Being reveals itself as an absolute. Every finite being is a whole being, a complete being; yet it is not the whole of Being. For it does not contain all reality, since there are beings outside of it. A particular being participates in Being. The particular being that participates in Being is a complete being, a subsistent whole unlike a part which is not a complete whole. The particular being, which is limited, is an imperfect being. It does not contain other particular beings; nor does it possess their perfection. Hence it does not contain all perfection. Consequently, it is imperfect. It does not mean that it is unfinished in itself. The perfection of every particular being belongs itself wholly to Being, and by that token it is to be distinguished from every other being. In this way Being possesses an absolute character. It is not opposed to anything. Consequently, it penetrates and envelops everything. Nevertheless, Being manifests some relativity, since the real is broken up into multiple unities which participate in Being. In other words, the participation of beings in Being or the presence of Being (One) in beings (many) is an undeniable fact.

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# Student Satisfaction Survey

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7.	Examination procedures were clearly given to you						
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After filling this questionnaires send it to: Programme Coordinator, 115, G Block, IGNOU, Maidan Garhi, New Delhi-110068

from the school

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