

From Being to Relation

Michinori Kobayashi

“What is being?” is an old and new question in philosophy that has been debated for centuries. This essay is an attempt to understand “being” as “event” by resolving “being” to “relation”, as well as giving an ontological framework to today’s compound sciences. In the quest of “being”, we will find ourselves approaching the thought of “Engi” or dependent organization, which is a Mahayana Buddhist concept.

1 Correlativity and Immateriality

Correlativity between subject and predicate

Here are three propositions: “This flower is rose.”, “Rose is a plant.” and “Plant is a living thing”. Those propositions suggest that for “this flower” which is an individual, “rose” is universal. In the same way, for “rose”, “a plant” is universal, and for “plant”, “a living thing”. Higher-level concepts could follow “living thing”.

However, because “this flower” could be any flower, it doesn’t have to be individual. If “living thing”, “plant” and “rose” are universal, then “this flower”, too, should be universal. Therefore, it is wrong to define “this flower” simply as individual. If one takes a nominalist point of view and insist that universality is just a sound and doesn’t exist, then, all of them, “this flower”, “rose”, “plant” and “living thing” would become just illusions.

Also, the relation between something individual and universal is only correlative. A thing is able to establish itself only in the relation between them. And the relation is

expressed by what is called copula. Neither subjective individual nor predicated universal can exist independently by themselves. Nothing can stand without relation. Both individual and universal represent its relations. Only expressions of relation come up with similar appearance to a real entity.

The same would be true as to the relation between entity and attribute. Attribute, too, can exist only in relation. Here are four propositions: "Socrates was 100 and some centimeters tall.", "Socrates was a cynical person.", "Socrates lived in Athens." and "Socrates lived in the 5th century BC." In this case, "100 and some", "a cynical man", "Athens" and "the 5th century BC", are attributes that are correlative information and are defined only in relation with others. An attribute is based on other attribute, and their relation defines the attribute. It cannot exist by itself. Such categories as character, quantity and status, represent the relation, and without these categories, an individual cannot establish itself. There is no such thing as an individual with self-identical entity. It is actually a connecting point of attribute's relation. The relation between entity and attribute can be reduced to that of relation and its element.

Therefore, whether a subject-predicate relation represents the relation between individual and universal (the subject is included by the predicate) or the relation between individual and attribute (the predicate is included by the subject), it is about relation. In the relation between subject and predicate, they exist only correlatively. Therefore, in the proposition "A is B", the copula, "is", is the expression of the relation. Thus, "being" is a relation, and both subject and predicate are by-products of the relation. Relation comes first, followed by entity.

The reason why a being is described in many ways is because the being depends its existence on the relation with other beings. A being acquires ambiguity in relation. The status of "one" is established in comparison with other numbers. Meanings of things are not inherent to them but acquired in relation with others.

From entity theory to relation theory

A thing is a state of relations. The nature of the thing is known from relations it has

with others. It is relations that forms the thing. Nothing can exist, cut off from any relations. Things exist not as independent entity but as hubs of relations. The character of a thing is defined by those relations.

Then, it should be true that “being” contains “existence” inside. “Existence” is reduced to “being”, and “being” to relation. When some predicates happen to gather in one place, the state is described “something is there.” We say “here is a white lily.”, because we know that there exists red-colored lily. Also, because we know the color is called “white”, we say it is white. It is all relational.

Hegel perceived all the “beings” in their relations. He thought that everything establishes itself in relation with others, and thus it is inevitable to contain some ambiguity. Indeed, Hegel’s *Science of Logic* is based on this thought, explaining such themes, which includes “person and many others”, “identity and difference”, “reaction and traction”, “inside-outside relation”, “confrontation”, “contradiction”, “essence and phenomenon”, “force and its occurrence”, “entirety and part”, “reason and subject”, “correlation of entity”, “correlation of reasoning” and “interaction”. According to Hegel, the notion of “pure thing” is also an abstract idea and not true. things, too, should be perceived from interactions inside of which each thing can stand out and be discriminated. (*1)

While things are separated to be distinguished in substantialism, the image of each thing is grasped in relations with others in relationalism.

The shift from the substantialistic view to the relationalistic view has been seen in the field of natural science since modern and pre-modern period. For example, the classic physics uses a relationalistic approach of a traction between an object and the earth, to explain the substantialistic notion of weight. The beginning of the classic physics was an attempt in deriving a function from the relation of quantified elements such as traction, motion, speed, energy, time, space and so on. The classic physics is a method to understand natural phenomena through these generalized functional relations. Therefore, it is natural to have a relationalism tendency in its analytical processes. This is even more so today. Relativity theory is a relationalistic understanding of quantity and energy and time and space, which were perceived as

substances. Another example is that, in quantum mechanics, the behavior of each particle is seen as irregular occurrences in the field or, in another word, the relation. In the transition from the classic physics to the contemporary physics, the significance of relation has outweighed that of substance.

There is no real entity

In the assumption that everything establishes only in relation, nothing can be substantial. Aristotle was wrong in his pursuit of independently existing “substance”, posing questions such as “what is being?” and “what is substantial? Although there are two standing points of whether to see it as subject or predicate, because everything establishes only in relations, nothing substantial could be found. Both Aristotle’s individualism and Plato’s universalism should be overcome.

Substance can reduce to relation. What seems substance is only a temporal form of many relations. For example, our society is not a static substance. It is rather an organism developed by human relations. In the same way, object is an organic form made of elements, not a substance.

Our notion of object is something substantial with identifiable individuality in any way. One object can occupy only one space at one time, and it exists as the same thing over time, which guarantees its substantiality.

However, such objects, too, have a cycle of life. For example, our body is sustained by metabolism, constantly replacing the old to the new. In this level, its individuality and substantiality are not true at least quantitatively. Also, living things keep changing its look till the end of the life. The same is occurring to other objects. Everything is repeating birth and death in every moment in the sense of both Aristotle’s *eidos* and *hyle*.

In order to resolve the contradiction between object’s creation-annihilation cycle and substance’s existence without any change, it is possible to apply the atomic theory. That is to explain that the atom extracted by dividing an object to the minimum unit is a permanent substance, and object’s life cycle is caused by atoms’ fusion and

fragmentation. However, it would be difficult to regard the atom a permanent substance for it is impossible to divide something to the very end. Nothing can stay the same forever. Solid appearance is merely a temporal result of interacting reactions. Kant argued the impossibility of objective recognition, but we should rather say that nothing is recognizable. What we call object is merely an element's reaction. Everything is just a phenomenon.

The thought of Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (Root Verses on the Middle Way)

In Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, abbreviated as the MMK, the foundational text of the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, the author, Nāgārjuna, argues that everything comes from “Engi”. Engi means both a correlativity and a relationship, in this concept, an entity can exist only on interdependence with others. Without it, the entity doesn't mean anything.

In the MMK, the term to mean substantiality of things is “Jisho”. Jisho is an eternal-self which cannot be changed and something with no relation. It is a true-self or a substantiality inherent to a thing, which makes the thing to be itself with self-sufficiency. Nāgārjuna explains that Jisho comes to exist only in Engi or relation, and cannot exist by itself. Jisho is based on “Tasho” (other Jisho). Jisho needs to be related with Tasho to exist. One cannot exist without others, and when one doesn't exist, others don't exist either. Things acquire Jisho or its inherent essence by being separated from other things. The separation is, of course, based on an assumption that there are others. Jisho and Tasho are correlative. (*2)

Something depending its existence to others cannot exist by itself, so it should rather be called as non-substantial existence. Nothing has Jisho, therefore there is no such thing as inherent true-self. No matter how much something seems solid with identity and continuity, it is a mere illusion. Indeed, such concept that things exist by themselves is a fiction. Everything in the world is, like a mirage or an illusion, an imaginary shadow. (*3)

In the MMK, Nāgārjuna explains emptiness of things that depend its origination to

others. Intrinsic nature doesn't exist in anything, everything is insufficient and something insufficient is empty. He reinvented the concept of Emptiness which has been taught since the beginning of Buddhism, by reading it not in a substantialist way but a relationality way, and revealed the emptiness of things.

However, that everything is empty doesn't mean there is an entity called emptiness. When everything is empty, the emptiness itself becomes empty, and therefore, paradoxically, everything becomes positive and is accepted. The following verse alludes this principle.

Because emptiness has a reason, Dharmas become truth, and if emptiness doesn't have any reason, nothing makes sense. (*4)

Negativity is denied here so everything is accepted as it is. All the negatives deny their own negativity to turn positive. Emptiness is an absolute positive as well as negative. The turn from the absolute negativity to the absolute positivity is what the emptiness theory aims at. Not leaning on empty nor non-empty and on negative nor positive, the true emptiness is cut from the exist/non-exist concept. This is the middle way.

2 Being as Event

Realization of truth

Thus, emptiness denies dependent organization and, through the denying of denial, accepts dependent organization. Emptiness denies the eternal-self of things and, through the denying of denial, accepts the eternal-self of things. Emptiness is truly what produces eternal-self. Things are accepted through denial. Everything is accepted as it is through emptiness. Here, illusion is not an illusion. When emptiness is emptied and denial is denied, all the things begin to realize as all of them are, then this actual living world emerges.

A plum flower is intrinsically an emptiness, yet in the early spring, it blooms, showing the arrival of the new season.

Each of such things as numerous stars in the night sky, glass and flowers growing in the field is an emergence and an appearance. They are generated and realized by themselves.

The verve form of a Latin word existential which means “being” is *existo* which means “appear abruptly”, “become”, “result in” and “generate”. Also, here, a being is defined as something realizing.

Heidegger argued that in ancient Greece, a being was considered, belonging to *physis*, opening up itself, make an appearance and realized itself in the light. Indeed, the original meaning of the Greek word “*physis*” was to appear and realize. Everything moves out of shadow to an open place. This is the meaning of “*alētheia* (truth)” said Heidegger. (*5) He also used the term “*Ereignis* (event)”. *Ereignis* means that the true-self (*Eigen*) realizes in its original form. (*6) The existence of an origin is something “*wesen*” or realizing, indicating the true-self of the thing. Thus, the world realizes.

“*Shinku-myōū* (filling the void)” is a Buddhist expression that express this sense clearly. Everything exists in the field of emptiness in their original state. There, everything is accepted as it is. What filling the void means is a being is the same as truth. Truth itself is invisible with no shape nor color, but it shines with its light every corner of the eternal space. Truth is so obviously real. Before this truth, the true-self of all that exist is naturally disclosed.

Fazang was a Tang-dynasty period Chinese monk who established the Huayan school of Mahayana Buddhism also insisted “*Shinnyō-zūien* (truth doesn’t stay the same)” and “filling the void”. “*Shinnyō*” means something that could look dirty following the result of its relation, but never lose its pure-self. A bright mirror can reflect both good and bad because of its brightness. The mirror itself is empty, and because of that, it can reflect everything. Moreover, the mirror and the reflection are one thing. A quiet water surface and ripples surface are the same thing. In the same way, “*Shinnyō*” and universal laws are one thing. (*7) A chunk of gold and a golden lion made from it are essentially the same thing. (*8) Universal laws are *Shinnyō*, and

everything is truth. This is what Fazang tried to express with “Shinnyo-zuien”. Never is truth found beyond a being, because truth is the way the being is as it is.

Phenomenon as an Event

If a being and a truth are the same thing, it is also true that phenomenon is the same as existence. Existence is not outside but inside of a phenomenon. Existence cannot be separated from phenomenon. There is no need for searching for things such as entity or Idea in the world of real existence which is beyond phenomenon. If phenomenon has its main part behind it, phenomenon would be just an appearance. Plato assumed an extrasensory space where Idea is, seeing this as an eternal existence. However, in this kind of dual-world theory, the contradiction between the appearance and the real existence would never be resolved. Therefore, it would be sensible to assume that being is expressed only as phenomenon. Phenomenon is a real existence, not a mere appearance. Real existence realizes as a phenomenon.

If everything realizes form relation, everything is something just occurs and they are all events. All the beings realize as phenomenon, therefore entity is a phenomenal event. The world is made up from countless events. Things don't stay the same self-sufficiently. It has to be perceived as event and phenomenon.

Whitehead, too, says entity is an occasion and an event. He sees things no more substance than event. Aristoteles thought that in the subject-predicate format, what becomes subject but not predicate is entity, and sought for the meaning of the entity. However, Whitehead denied such substantiality and reduced it to event. It is the world consisted of collective events, being active, creating something new. (*9)

“Riji-muge” is a Huayan school Buddhist saying, which means the state of emptiness and substance coexisting. And “Ji” in “Riji-muge” has much in common in its meaning with the concept of “event” in this context. The whole “Ri (emptiness)” occurs as “Ji”. Emptiness reveals its color. Water which is flat indiscriminately appears as many waves. But those waves will never leave the water and the water will not let waves go. In the same way, there is no boundary between emptiness and event. There is no

difference between them. When emptiness reveals its true-self, event occurs. When emptiness follows its Engi, event realizes. Stars in the night sky, flowers in the field, nothing is not the expression of emptiness. Events that occur from Engi are shown by the light of truth. Event as phenomenon and emptiness as truth are perfectly interacting each other. Nothing separates the truth and the phenomenon, which is the ultimate state of “Riji-muge” of the Huayan school Buddhism.

Field and event

The same concept is reflected also in modern physics. In quantum field theory, the field is expressed by the shape of quantum. Particles appearing and disappearing in the micron world is the state of activities of the field. Particle is a trajectory of the partially condensed field. Here, substances are productions of the field. The field represents the whole system of physics, and it is impossible to take out only particles or each activity from the field. Existing substances and the field cannot be separated. The universe is an ever active field, and substances are expressions of temporal state of this essential field.

In today’s physics, substantial beings are reduced to energy. Substantial energy is a change of the energy of field. In the micro world, particles and antiparticles appear from the sufficient amount of energy of the field and disappear by colliding against each other, getting reduced to pure energy of the field. The activity is as if a particle appears from vacuum and disappears into vacuum. However, the vacuum is indeed a field filled with energy and countless particles continue to come and go.

The activities of numerous particles are the vibration of energy of the field, and the particles express the patterns of the vibration. The energy in the field is shown as the size of each particle. The universe is infinite ocean of energy, and substances would be compared to the waves occurring on the surface of the ocean. The fabric of energy is the universe, and substances are nothing but patterns woven into it. Moreover, it is said that the whole universe itself has occurred from a huge vacuum of fluctuation of time and space. The vacuum developed a massive energy, producing substances and anti-

substances, and when the symmetry was broken, substance-based our universe was born.

The complementary principle of particle and wave also came from this origin. Any elementary particle such as electron has both natures of particle and wave. Particles are vibrations of the field and also waves. As the vibration takes a certain pattern, it appears as a particle. Particles and waves are two sides of complementary beings.

Then, existing beings are mere production of events. Whether they are elementary particles, atoms, molecules or other substances, it could be considered as a wave pattern that occurs in the field filled with energy. The world is not made of things but events. Here, those classic materialistic concepts such as ever-lasting physical body, independent physical existence or complete things contraposing in void. Substantiality is denied also here.

Indeed, it doesn't make sense anymore that to regard elementary particles as independent or self-sufficient existences. Particles are trajectories of vibrating field like whirling waves of the river. They are mere relatively regularly occurring patterns in the continuous fluid motion, which exist only a moment. Particles are exactly like them. Therefore, particles don't have identity. Even if it does, it is just a coincidental occurrence of patterns of similar form. The notion of identical independent existence has already failed. The classic idea of thing's identity is an abstract thought. Things are fundamentally selfless and non-existence.

In modern physics, the model of continuously existing substance that support the fundamental laws has already collapsed. In the study of the micro world, even the gap between beings and non-beings has become ambiguous. It is both true and untrue that particles can be always found in the certain spot of the field. We can talk about only a tendency. As if a wave occurs on the surface of the vast ocean, things occur from a creative field.

Reducing existence to relation and event, getting over the boundary of the existentialism, would be a necessary process also to understand the existentialistic fundamentals of compound science, which form itself from countless elements

interaction.

note

- 1 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik I*, *Gesammelte Werke Bd.11*, Felix Meiner, 1978, S.329-S.332
- 2 龍樹『中論』一五・四 国訳一切経 印度撰述部中観部一 羽溪了諦訳 大東出版社 一九七六年 九七頁
- 3 同書 七・三五、一七・三三、二三・八 一一四頁、一七一頁、二〇七頁ほか
- 4 同書 二四・一四 二一六頁
- 5 Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, §38 §39, *Gesamtausgabe Bd.40*, V.Klostermann, 1983, S.108-S.110
- 6 Heidegger, *Holzwege*, *Gesamtausgabe Bd.5*, V.Klostermann, 1977, S.39-S.43
- 7 法蔵『華嚴五教章』卷中 大乘仏典（中国・日本篇）7 木村清孝訳 中央公論社 一九八九年 六三—六四頁
- 8 法蔵『金獅子章』 大乘仏典（中国・日本篇）7 小林圓照訳 二四〇—二四三頁
- 9 Whitehead, *Science and the modern World*, Cambridge U.P., 1953, chap. VII VIII

(Source: Michinori Kobayashi, “*Seimei no Tetsugaku*” Collection 5, “Fukuzatsu wo Tetsugaku suru” Minerva Shobo, Kyoto, 2017)