

# From Relation to Becoming

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Looking back the thoughts of “becoming” in east and west, perceiving “being” through “becoming” and studying their logic. Also making clear the ontological base of the world of complex system.

## 1. Perceiving “being” through “becoming”

### **The world of generation and corruption**

In the micro world, elements that are bigger than particles such as atomic nuclei, atoms and molecules seem to be relatively stable entities. In fact, their existence is entirely supported by ceaseless works of countless elementary particles. We observe objects around us as if they were just quiet and static. However, in the micro level, they are consisted with countless molecules and atoms which are totally active. We tend to see objects around us as solid and stabile. But they are not. In fact, they are very active. There is nothing static in the world, and things are always moving. They change and their conditions and qualities keep changing too. In modern natural science, scientists, like Plato did, always try to overcome the essential law of the nature such as the cycle of generation and corruption by discovering immutable elements in the nature. But, do humans really have to?

In the world of natural lives, a higher level than object's, individual plants and animals live along the natural cycle of birth, growth and death. Moreover, entire species are evolving and transforming. And, human societies change its structures

along with environmental changes.

The universe is not an exception. In the outer space, numerous stars are making the same cycle ceaselessly. Gas condenses in the space to form stars which grow, shrink, collide and explode, changing the status of themselves incessantly. In fact, the whole universe itself is following the cycle of generation and corruption. The universe is considered to have been expanding since its birth and supposed to stop the expansion eventually to evaporate or start shrinking till it collapses.

From particles in the micro world to the universe in the macro world, nothing stays motionless. The core nature of “being” is to change. The meaning of “being”, the existence of “being” has to be understood with generation or “becoming”.

### **“Being” as “becoming”**

All substances are fluid and follow the cycle of birth and death. What exist in reality never stop changing and moving. Things produced day by day, streams that change its form minutes by minutes, that are substances. It is “becoming” that make substances. The old are gone, and the new come up. Existing things never stay the same.

“Being” is like a trajectory of “becoming”. “Being” is like a mere mirage that emerges when ever-moving substances are seen in stop motion. “Being” is seen as a permanent entity when compared to “becoming”. Substance is a concept referring to this self-sufficient eternity. But that is just a concept that actually is an abstracted version of reality. Nothing stays the same in reality and there is no eternity.

In fact, substance is a relation, and “becoming” is relation’s separations and reassembling. What really exist is only “becoming”. Things are produced by a formative action of relations that collects events occurring from relations. When this formative action stops, events will disperse and things will disappear, then other things will start to be produced. One combination of relations quickly changes. This is the cycle of generation and corruption of things. Therefore, “being” is “becoming”. There is something, that says only some events happen to predicate and form it in one place. In the next moment, its contents will be all different. Happening events and continuous changes are existence.

When S is P, “is” doesn’t represent “becoming”. That means “being” can’t express

“becoming” by itself. It should be “S becomes P”. S which is not P becomes P. The term “become” means “come to be”, so “being” is already included in “becoming”. “Being” is “becoming”. “Being” is one aspect of “becoming”. We should establish the thought not of “being” but “becoming”.

Here is a white lily. The lily changes its color and shape over time. All individuals keep changing until it dies. Each one of individuals is in a cycle of birth and death. Nothing lives forever. That is the generation and corruption. We are never able to see absolute self-sufficient substance in individuals. It cannot be found even in the universe. Then, where “eternal lily” or “Idea of lily” to be found? Something “becoming” shouldn’t be seen as a mere illusion. We don’t have to see things that generate and corrupt as fragile, transient illusions and search for eternity beyond it. That is wrong to think eternity and “becoming” stand side by side.

Whether they become or they move, we should see them as they are. Substance needs to be perceived as something dynamic. “Being” shouldn’t be seen as fixed, motionless entity. Something dynamic cannot be grasped from static point of views. Error occurs when one tries to see something dynamic as static and “becoming” as “being”.

### **Overcoming contradiction laws**

Reality is “becoming” and change. Changes from non-existence to existence and from existence to non-existence, that is the nature of “becoming”. When “becoming” is set as a fundamental condition, contradictions between non-existence and existence don’t even exist. In the process of “becoming”, appearing and disappearing are happening at once. “Becoming” already contains contradictions, and that is also one of the characters of “becoming”.

“Becoming” overcomes contradiction laws. They are propositions such as “A cannot be non-A at the same time.” The condition for this proposition is that A and non-A are separated and unexchangeable. In other word, “becoming” is denied here. However, in reality, everything does “become”. A becomes non-A. “Becoming” overcomes contradictions easily.

Also, “becoming” overcomes identity laws. “A is A” is a basic proposition of identity

law, but it is also a contradiction when it is reversed. The proposition actually means that “A is A. A exists independently and A is not non-A.” The concept of substantiality is the base of this. “Becoming” is denied by identity law here. But “becoming” can overcome this. It suggests that “A becomes something which is not A.” In this way, “becoming” is not regulated by identity laws. “Becoming” contains elements that denies identity laws. When “A becomes non-A”, substantiality of A that suggests “A is A” is already denied.

In the same way, “becoming” can overcome the excluded middle laws, which is also a reversed theory of contradiction law, suggesting that “something is either A or non-A.” Because “becoming” means A becomes non-A, it naturally means something is either A or non-A. “Becoming” is not regulated by excluded middle laws either.

Such laws of contradiction, identity and excluded middle are all statical logics to see things as motionless. But, because things never stop and they are “becoming”, these statical logics are not relevant to capture things. In order to capture generations and corruptions as they are, it is necessary to overcome statical formalities. When it is realized, A will be non-A and being becomes non-being. Thus, “becoming” can be recovered. Whether existence or non-existence, time or space, rather it should be drawn from “becoming”.

## 2. Thoughts of “becoming”

### **Helacritus and Parmenides**

It was Helacritus who first in the West left a deep track of thoughts on the essence of “becoming”. He observed things in their generation and corruption process. His word, “all things are in a state of flux”, shows how he saw things as something like a river which flows ceaselessly, which is expressed well in the next phrase.

We step into the same flux of river and we do not.

We exist and we do not. (\*1)

Here, he is saying about the essential quality of “becoming” in which “being” and “non-being” are coexisting yet contradicting each other. “Being” is observed through “becoming”.

Changes of things occur also from changes of contradictions.

Immortals are who should die and mortals are who should live. Someone’s death is lived by others, and someone’s life is died by others. (\*2)

As modern physicists see energy in the world as a source of transformation, Helacritus determined fire as the source of all things and all things are derived from fire. He might have seen a symbolic quality of “becoming” in fire which, blazing and disappearing, never stays still.

Fire lives on the death of earth, air on the death of fire, water on the death of air and earth on the death of water. (\*3)

Also, the changes of things are caused by struggles among things and contradictions between things.

War is a father and a king of all things. (\*4)

This well-known Helacritus’ saying clearly expresses that “becoming” contains contradictions inside and “becoming” occurs because of the contradictions.

It is true that Parmenides denied “becoming”, insisting that only “being” exists and “nothing” doesn’t. “Becoming” is the process of “being” coming to exist from nothing, and a death is the process of “being” returning to nothing. In either process, “nothing”

is inevitably involved. So, when the concept of “becoming” is true, naturally “being” and “nothing” are able to coexist. However, Parmenides argued that random opinions are all caused by this confusion of “being” and “nothing”. He set himself firmly on the position where only “being” can be perceived and not “nothing”. “Being” is a universal, independent, inseparable and self-sufficient entity. There is nothing other than “being”. There are no such concepts in “being” as plurality or changes. (\*5)

However, his thought is based on both identity laws and contradiction laws. They are theories merely adaptable to thinking on static objects, casting lights only on one side of things. Then, we must say Parmenides’ view is insufficient. The world we live in is active and based on “becoming”. That is where we must look at it. Seeing “becoming” from “being”, in other word, trying to capture a movement from static position could give us the image of false reality.

A disciple of Parmenides, Zeno, seems to have made the same mistake. In attempt to prove his teacher’s doctrine —denial of plurality and changes—, he came up with the well-known Zeno’s paradoxes and suggested the contradiction contained in plurality and changes. (\*6)

Among Zeno’s paradoxes concerning motion of things, the allegory of Achilles and turtle is particularly popular. An honored runner in ancient Greek, Achilles, is trying to catch up with a turtle who is running ahead of him. By the time Achilles comes to the point where the turtle was, it is still running ahead of him because it has made some progress, and this could happen forever. Therefore, Achilles will never overtake the turtle.

“The Arrow paradox” that dismisses motions is also known. When an arrow flies from A to B, it passes through infinite points inbetween. If so, the arrow might be said it is motionless at each point. Therefore, he argues, the arrow is not flying. By providing such paradoxes, Zeno tried to prove “being” is an entirely static existence.

Zeno’s error was his mixing up motion and space, and that he thought what can be proved for space can be proved also for motion. His argument that motion can divide limitlessly as space can be is a leap of logic. Whether it is Achilles, for a turtle or an arrow, motion cannot be divided like space.

Zeno’s arguments are based on the assumption that things are static and truth is

found in the static world. But, the nature of the world which is moving and generating cannot be understood from static point of view. Both moving things and static things need to be seen as they are.

### **Plato and Aristotle**

It is true that Plato established the theory of Idea to reconcile Heraclitus's "becoming" theory and Parmenides' "being" theory. Plato meant that "Idea" is an ultimate truth and a representation of universality. It is both one and omnipresent, and a model and a reason for all existences. On the other hand, generation and change of things are plural, separatable and unlimited. It is something fleeting and comparative, being only as non-existences and imitations of Idea. Thus, Plato thinks "being" is the state where things generate and change also have static Idea. Separating the world to phenomenon and reason, he defined Idea in the reason world as "being" and existences of different kinds in the phenomenal world as non-existences in order to reconcile "becoming" and "being". Plato tried to see true existences in the Idea world beyond the world where generations and changes are occurring, or the world of "becoming". In this respect, Plato was a successor of Parmenides.

However, is Plato's two-world logic possible? Everything "becomes" and what "becomes" cannot be seen as phenomenon. There is no point in trying to see non-becoming world beyond the becoming world. Also, separating the world into two in an attempt to save both "becoming" and "being" or stability and commotion would create other problems in the relation of the two worlds, which is not an easy to answer.

While Plato saw generating and corrupting things negatively as mere phenomenon, Aristotle positively involved "becoming" and motions into his theories. He thought that conventional concepts of "form" (eidos) and "matter" (hylē) were not enough to explain "becoming" and commotion and introduced a set of relating counter concepts of "possibility" (dynamis) and "actuality" (energeia). Things exist as something shift from possibility to reality. With these two sets of concepts, Aristotle tried to describe phenomenon of becoming, change and motion.

In answering the question: "what is being?", Aristotle modified it to "what is substance?" But "substance" is not static but active and develop itself from dynamis to

energeia. “Becoming” and movement are transformations from quantity as dynamis to form as energeia. Matter is a dynamis but, at the same time, it can change and form with its own character. “Becoming” is that a matter of dynamis becomes visible with an energeia form. Aristotle saw substance as a combination of matter and form. But it always moves from matter to form and from “dynamis” to energeia. He thinks that “substance” becomes and develops and “being” becomes. In this respect, Aristotle should be praised for restoring Heraclitus’s view on “becoming”.

### **Hegel and Nietzsche**

Hegel was a modern western philosopher who looked closely at “becoming” and analyzed the theoretical structure of it. In *Science of Logic*, he started the chapter about ontology with references to “to be” (reines Sein). His argument was that “a pure being” cannot be defined in any way so it is practically “nothing” and also “pure nothing” (reines Nichts) cannot be defined either. Therefore, “nothing” is the same as “being”. Here, “being” shifts to nothing, and nothing shifts to “being”. Based on their sameness, Hegel introduced “becoming” (Werden) as a fusion of them. (\*7)

“Becoming” is something being and nothing, and nothing and being. The truth of being and nothing is “becoming”. Only in the framework of “becoming”, “being” is recognized as “being”, and “nothing” as “nothing”, and “being” becomes “nothing”, and “nothing” becomes “being”. Generation in which “nothing” becomes “being” and corruption in which “being” becomes “nothing” are two aspects of “becoming”. Nothing generates and corrupts without containing inside both “being” and “nothing”. Everything contains a bud of corruption in its generation. Like this, Hegel saw a fusion of “being” and “nothing”. He highly praised Heraclitus because he first proposed this view. (\*8)

In Hegel’s thinking, a contradiction is seen as a deeper, essential thing. Everything is essentially contradictory, and only when a contradiction is inside, it has a life. Contradiction is the core of all movements and lives. To move means that something exists and not exists in the same moment. Something can move as long as it contains a contradiction inside. Hegel thinks that things move because of the contradiction. (\*9)



Nietzsche also placed “becoming” opposite to “being”, making “becoming” the truth. For him, being is to become, and it is the truth of life. For Nietzsche, the existence of “being” was “becoming”.

Standing on this view, Nietzsche denied the reversed world established by philosophers after Plato, and criticized those double-world views. (\*10) In the reversed world and the double world views, our reality where things change is considered to be an illusion and the true world is beyond it. But this world that is set beyond our ever-changing world is a mere mirage. All things are becoming. There is no absolute truth nor eternal reality. Nietzsche overturned Plato’s principle by releasing things that become inside “becoming” and discovering a real world.

He accepted the confusing world of “becoming” unconditionally and tried to find a value there. To do so, he sought for substances in the world of “becoming” which had been denied as an illusion by traditional western metaphysics, and, on the contrary, insisted that illusions should be accepted as truth. When a real world is given up, the illusion world will not be an illusion anymore. Moreover, when a value is placed on changing realities, those notions such as eternal substance and absolute truth will be an illusion, fake and misconception. (\*11)

From the position that finding truth in “becoming”, Nietzsche valued pre-Socrates philosophers who found “becoming” in everything, especially Anaximandros who explained how the world had generated from unconditional things, and Heraclitus’ thoughts of constant changes of things. He tried to transform western value by returning to the thoughts of philosophers before Socrates where both “being” and “becoming” are properly observed.

### **Bergson and Whitehead**

Henri-Louis Bergson was the 20th century philosopher and the leading figure in developing arguments based on “becoming” among his contemporaries. According to Bergson, “being” appears as a continuous “becoming”. “Continuity” (dure) that he saw as the true being is a continuous change that cannot be separated and it is “becoming” itself. In order to understand continuity, we have to place ourselves completely in the

continuity. It is a true “being” perceived not by thinking but by intuition. “Being” is changing all the time, and only the state of changing exists. Furthermore, it is not necessary to assume something that support those changes from beneath. The notion that changes of things are supported by something static has to be removed. (\*12)

“Being” is a movement, and a movement itself is “being”. Something motionless is a mere appearance. Movements need to be treated as an inevitable component. Zeno denied movement. His mistake was his thinking that movement could be divided, and divided components could be reassembled again. It is just like a roll of movie film that reproduce movement by connecting many static images. But it is merely a visual trick and not real. Movement cannot be recreated from divided parts. No matter how many static objects lined up, they will never make a real movement. True movement is an indissoluble pure continuity that cannot be perceived with idealistic notion in which movement is seen as a static image. Conceptualism, or reason, is apt to observe a movement as a static object. We try to reproduce “becoming”, observing it from outside, not inside. With such attitude, Bergson said, we will never be able to capture real movement. (\*13)

Whitehead was also one of the leading philosophers of the early 20th century who set “becoming” in the center of his thinking. He thought the world is made up with ceaselessly becoming events. (\*14) Essentially, the world shows itself as “becoming”. World’s activities are in the continuous “becoming”, and they never stop making creative advances toward new standards. His philosophy was non-substantialism, which could be called as “the philosophy of becoming”, dealing “becoming” as reality, and he expanded it to all directions, to universe, objects and lives.

In Whitehead’s theories, “being” is formed with “becoming”. “Being” doesn’t exist without “becoming”. It is “becoming” that forms “being” and identity of each individual. “Being” is a possibility of “becoming” and “becoming” is an actuality of “being”. The shift from possibility to actuality is “becoming”. He also viewed “becoming” as a process and grasped objects in the process. In this world, everything is in the process of movement, change, transformation and creative advance. Reality is a process and “being” is a process, too. (\*15)

In this way, Whitehead captured “being” in the context of process and interpreted

existing objects as living organisms that form by themselves. He called his own philosophy as “organic philosophy” and it was also a philosophy of “process” and “becoming”. Heraclitus said “things flow”, “nobody can step into the same river twice”. Whitehead built a grand philosophical system based on Heraclitus’ thinking.

### **Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism**

Not long after Heraclitus, thoughts in which things are seen in accordance with “becoming” were born in China. That is Taoism which says everything comes from “Tao” (the way). Tao is the source of activities of ever-changing eternal universe and “being” which never stop changing itself. One comes from the way, two come from one, three come from two, and three produces the rest of the world. The way cannot be described. It doesn’t have any form. It is nothing, but still produces everything, invisible just like a pivot in the center of a wheel. It is also called Tao pivot. The world is a ceaseless flow of changes and Tao. All things that generate and corrupt are temporal appearances on the process of this fleeting way. (\*16)

Taoism also sees things in the process of movement and change, and flow and becoming. The world that Tao explains is fundamentally dynamic and dominated by limitless “becoming”. Furthermore, “becoming” of things are considered to occur in accordance with periodic cycle of contradicting phenomenon; yin and yang: come and go: expansion and contraction: wax and wane: warm and cold: happiness and evil. When Yin fills, it turns to Yang. Evil turns to happiness, and happiness turns to evil. Taoism perceives “being” through vibrations of the nature. Amid ceaseless changes, everything takes the course of growth and diminishing. But Taoism says everything is one under Tao and to follow the way and the nature is the best way of leading a life. It is the life of following “becoming”.

Mahayana Buddhism also explains impermanence of things and sees the universe based on “becoming”. For example, Nāgārjuna, in his *The Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, denied substantiality and identity of things, saying everything is selfless because nothing generates by itself. Thus, things are not static. Everything is generated and corrupted.

However, because Nāgārjuna denies not only things but also the denial itself, he

denies both stillness and movement. He denies generation and corruption, too. In short, Nāgārjuna denies everything including life, death, “becoming” and “being”. Because everything —“becoming”, corruption, continuity, movement, motionlessness— comes from causes (Engi), they are all kind of illusion or dream. (\*17)

But because Nāgārjuna’s theory denies everything, it denies even denial itself, therefore, everything turns positive. So, actually “becoming”, corruption, continuity, movement are motionlessness are actually all approved. “Becoming”, corruption, continuity, movement, motionlessness are all realities. Ultimately, the conclusion of The Mūlamadhyamakakārikā is an approval to everything being as it is.

Generally, Buddhist theories sees everything in the cycle of generation and corruption, movement and change, overcoming the conflict between existence and non-existence and identity and contradiction. The Huayan Buddhism is particularly well-known for having developed philosophy on “becoming”, seeing everything in “becoming” and movement. The Huayan perceives “being” as “event” occurring from relations, in other word as generating, corrupting and changing event. Everything changes at any moment. As long as following the law of cause, this world is impermanent. But this impermanence is at the same time an expression of “Ku”, or emptiness, therefore the impermanence is not denied. This impermanence is a reality. The cycle of generation and corruption is a truth. In the Huayan Buddhism, everything is grasped in dynamism and seen as “becoming”.

“Being” is a relation. It is not a substance. It generates and becomes. “Becoming” itself is a substance and a truth. “Being” needs to be reduced to “becoming”.

### 3. Ontology of the Complex system

If a system that forms itself from mutual-interactions of numerous elements is called a complex system, the universe, lives and human’s societies are all complex systems. It is an active, living system that ceaselessly produces new things.

In the world of complex system, new things are being “becoming” all the time. To observe the ontological base of it, a study of non-substantialism where “being” is always seen as a changing event is inevitable, with reducing “being” to a relation, and a relation to “becoming”.

The world of complex system is that of mutual relations. All elements are defined in terms of relations with other elements there, nothing can be perceived outside the network of relations. This is the reason why a complex system is always dynamic, always producing new structures and forms.

Things that come up in the complex system are events that emerge from relations of elements. Here, “being” means emerging and generating as events. In the world of relations, all the events are defined in terms of relations with other events, each event cannot be separated from others. In other word, one thing exists in relation with others, not by itself. In the world of relations, one thing includes other things, and is included by others. The core nature of the world of relations, or the complex system is this interconnectivity.

Because the complex system is based on element’s relations, “ontology of relations” is necessary. “Being” means being related. Also in the complex system, elements exist only in relations. Elements define itself by its relations and change according to the shift of relations, closely connected with the dynamism of relations. Also, relations themselves change at the same time. The ontological base of the complex system should be found in relations of things.

In relations, no independent substance exists. Even something apparently being permanent, it’s a mere temporal collective entity of several relations of several phenomenon. Even in the complex system that stands only on relations, each component exists only by relating to others and by no means an independent. Therefore, ontological base of a complex system should be sought not in ontology of substance but in that of non-substantiality.

All things generate in relations and they are not substantial. Something non-substantial changes. The world is a dynamic entity, being in a ceaseless “becoming”, moving toward new creations.

A complex system is a world moving and producing new things. To get a precise image of such complex world, a dynamic philosophy that perceive “being” from “becoming” is required. That is “the philosophy of becoming”.

## NOTE

- 1 Herakleitos, Fragment,49a
- 2 *ibid.*,62
- 3 *ibid.*,76
- 4 *ibid.*,53
- 5 Parmenides, Fragment,2 3 6 8
- 6 Aristoteles, *Physica*, VI 9 239b5-30
- 7 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik I*, *Gesammelte Werke Bd.11*, Felix Meiner,1978,S.43f.
- 8 *ibid.*,S.44-S.48 S.56f.
- 9 *ibid.*,S.286f.
- 10 Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Nietzsche Werke VI-1*, Gruyter, 1968, S.31-S.34
- 11 Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, *Nietzsche Werke VI-3*, Gruyter, 1969, S.74f.
- 12 Bergson, *L'Évolution Créatrice*, *Oeuvres, édition du centenaire*, P.U.F.,1963, pp.747-749
- 13 *ibid.*,pp.749-760
- 14 Whitehead, *Science and the modern World*, Cambridge U.P., 1953, chap. VII VIII
- 15 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Harper, 1960, pp.33-34 p.101
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- 17 龍樹『中論』7-34 7-35 国訳一切経 印度撰述部中観部一 羽溪了諦訳 大東出版社 1976 p.113~p.114

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