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## CONTENTS

On the Watch-Tower <i>Radha Burnier</i>	283
Albert Einstein and Max Planck: Nature, Science and the Absolute <i>Klaus K. Klostermaier</i>	288
Helena Petrovna Blavatsky <i>W. S. M.</i>	294
Is Reincarnation True? <i>Ernest Wood</i>	295
Be-ness and Nothingness in <i>The Secret Doctrine</i> <i>Robert S. Corrington</i>	302
Exploring the Nature of Our Search <i>Trần-Thi-Kim-Diêu</i>	307
Fundamentalism is Foreign to Indian Thought <i>L. R. Sharma</i>	312
Theosophical Work around the World	317
International Directory	318

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Cover picture: The Magpie Robin (*Copsychus saularis*). A very good mimic of other birds' calls, the male breaks out into melodious song during the breeding season – by R. R. Chari

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# Be-ness and Nothingness in *The Secret Doctrine*

ROBERT S. CORRINGTON

PHILOSOPHERS and theologians are often deeply puzzled about the relationship between pure Being (Be-ness, in Blavatsky) and Non-being or Nothingness. The word 'Be-ness' seems to connote fullness, plenitude, and even originating potency, whereas the word 'Nothingness' seems to connote sheer emptiness, a total lack of any potency or fecund possibility. For most Christian theologians Being is far more 'real' than Nothingness, which is conquered by God in the single act of creation, an act that brings beings into the world and protects them from Nothingness. For some schools of Buddhism, on the other hand, Nothingness has priority over Be-ness insofar as Being is emergent from the Void. However, in *The Secret Doctrine* Blavatsky presents a unique perspective that argues both for the identity of Be-ness and Nothingness, and the fundamental difference between them; that is, they are one, yet not fully the same. In the main body of this essay I will show how she argues for the initial identity of Be-ness and Nothingness,

while in the concluding paragraphs I will show how the *difference* between Be-ness and Nothingness emerges.

Before talking about the main issue it is important to mention the primary contrast term for Blavatsky between Be-ness and Nothingness. The term is 'a being' by which she refers to that which emerges from the inner correlation of the two symbols of Be-ness; i.e., absolute abstract space, and absolute abstract motion. Anything that is 'a being', rather than pure Be-ness, is finite, determined, conditioned, and filled with that form of absolute abstract motion that is manifest as periodicity. Like the Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, Blavatsky is emphatic that the ultimate is not *a* being, but the sheer ground of being. In terms of Advaita Vedānta one would say that Parabrahman is without traits of any kind (Nirguna Brahman) and there is no way to move, even via analogy or negative theology, from the examination of a being, no matter how sacred, to an understanding of that which is never a being or order within the world. Hence

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### Be-ness and Nothingness in *The Secret Doctrine*

both Be-ness and Nothingness are utterly different in nature from any being in the manifest world, which, by definition, is infused with becoming (moving time) and periodicity.

Blavatsky refers to the German philosopher, Hegel (1770-1831), in a number of places in *The Secret Doctrine*. On the issue of the relationship between Being and Nothingness, she finds his thinking to be in complete accord with hers: 'The Hegelian doctrine, which identifies *Absolute Being* or "Be-ness" with "Non-Being" and represents the Universe as an *eternal becoming*, is identical with the Vedānta philosophy.'<sup>1</sup> Near the beginning of his 1812 *Science of Logic (Wissenschaft der Logic)*, Hegel states:

It [Being] is pure indeterminateness and emptiness. There is *nothing* to be intuited in it, if one can speak here of intuiting; or, it is only this pure intuiting itself. Just as little is anything to be thought in it, or it is equally only this empty thinking. Being, the indeterminate immediate, is in fact *nothing*, and neither more nor less than *nothing*. . . . Nothing is therefore, the same determination, or rather absence of determination, and thus altogether the same as, pure *being*.<sup>2</sup>

Since neither Be-ness nor Nothingness have any traits on their own (neither internal nor relational), it follows that they cannot be anything conditioned or determined in any way. By the same logic, since they have no traits, they cannot be distinguished from each other. Therefore,

in some sense, they are identical, but not as identical 'whats', or being-things. They are identical in the deeper sense that they are both unconditional (*Unbestimmtheit*). However, there is one crucial difference between Hegel and Blavatsky that has to do with the question of how accessible Be-ness is to human apprehension. For Hegel, there is a direct awareness of pure Being through 'pure intuiting itself'. In the German philosophical writing of this period (from Kant onwards) the word *Anschauung* denotes an immediacy of awareness, not some kind of hunch about the future. For Blavatsky, in strict contrast, Be-ness and Nothingness are absent to us; that is *in abscondito*. This is the utterly hidden divine (the 'Unknown Root') that can never become pure presence for embodied creatures, nor can they become the 'object' of human speculation or thought.

Thus far it has been argued that Be-ness and Nothingness are unconditional, non-determinate, without traits, identical but not as 'whats', and that for Blavatsky they remain in profound absence from embodied creatures that are all-too-ready to project forms of presence onto the 'Unknown Root'. What exactly does she say in *The Secret Doctrine* about Be-ness and its corollary, Nothingness?

Blavatsky has a tendency to move from epistemological to ontological arguments and back again. This means that she will talk about how finite creatures come to know Be-ness, while also arguing about how Be-ness and Nothingness must be *an sich*; namely, in

themselves. Note here that she is not saying that we can gain Hegelian-style intuitive access to what Be-ness and Nothingness are, but that we are left with a Kantian-style move that goes from what we do observe to what 'must' be its grounding condition. Blavatsky frequently employs Kant's fundamental distinction between the *phenomenal realm* and the *noumenal realm*. The former realm, in which we live, is shaped by space, time, and causality, hence periodicity, while the latter realm is the realm of the true thing-in-itself which is unknowable until and unless we pass beyond our finite incarnational status and become one with the ultimate.

Here is one of the best examples of the epistemological argument from the Proem:

In the sense and perceptions of finite 'Beings', THAT is Non-'being', in the sense that it is the one Be-ness; for, in this ALL lies concealed its coeternal and coeval emanation or inherent radiation, which, upon becoming periodically Brahmā (the male-female Potency), becomes or expands itself into the manifested Universe.<sup>3</sup>

From the human perspective, Be-ness looks like Non-being in that it is not a *being* in the manifest world (the only thing we know) and must therefore not exist. For the most part, humans are only interested in probing into 'somethings' that have traits; that is, 'stuff' that is accessible to finite modes of perception. Yet if we try to look at how Be-ness works

*an sich* (insofar as we can speculate), it becomes obvious that it has the trait of emanation into a more finite deity that can be named Brahmā, or the creator.

Blavatsky is arguing that Be-ness must appear to us as Nothingness at the same 'time'. One reason that this correlation makes good sense is that neither Be-ness nor Nothingness can be subject to space, time, and causality — the forms that of necessity shape and limit us. The more ontological-style argument is presented in her stanza II.1:

Paranishpanna, remember, is the *summum bonum*, the Absolute, hence the same as Paranirvāna. Besides being the final state, it is that condition of subjectivity which has no relation to anything but the one Absolute Truth (Paramārtha-satya) on its plane. It is that state which leads one to appreciate correctly the full meaning of Non-Being, which, as explained, is Absolute Being.<sup>4</sup>

Ontologically, there is an identity between Be-ness and Non-Being, parallel to the epistemological identity, which stems from our finite ways of knowing. Eternal subjectivity is different from human subjectivity in that the former has no object. In the human and animal realms subjectivity is always paired with an external object. There is a subject/object polarity and the structure of otherness.

Deepening even further the ontological side of her identity argument, Blavatsky brings in the notion of the Ātman from the Upanishad-s; namely, the universal soul, which she also equates

### Be-ness and Nothingness in *The Secret Doctrine*

with Emerson's Over-Soul. Unlike the personal soul, all human beings share in Ātman:

'... Ātman passes into NON-BEING, which is absolute being'. This means that the purely Nirvānic state is a passage of Spirit back to the ideal abstraction of Be-ness, which has no relation to the plane on which our Universe is accomplishing its cycle.<sup>5</sup>

Ātman is not subject to the conditions of space, time, and causality. Thus it is identical to Be-ness and Non-Being insofar as they obtain outside of, or prior to, the conditions of finitude. In reiterating the Upanishadic teaching that Ātman is Parabrahman, Blavatsky is stating that the ultimate depth-dimension of the personal self is identical to Be-ness and Non-Being, but lives in ignorance of this identity, partially because Be-ness and Nothingness are in a state of profound absence (contra Hegel).

But what can we ask about the difference within the identity of Be-ness and Nothingness? Initially, Blavatsky leaves us with a seeming paradox. This understanding of the identity and difference between these twin ultimates may be beyond our apprehension: 'The idea of Eternal Non-being, which is the One Being [the Kantian *noumenon*], will appear a paradox to anyone who does not remember that we limit our ideas of being to our present consciousness of existence.<sup>6</sup> Yet, by an analogy, which, strictly speaking is not allowed, she provides one way to help us see a difference between Be-ness and

Non-being: '... the total aggregate being the One manifested Universe that issues from the unmanifested or Absolute—called Non-being, or "No-Number", to distinguish it from BEING or the "One Number"'.<sup>7</sup>

If Be-ness is analogous to the primary number '1', it is possible to argue that this number has the connotations of unity, fullness, and a kind of sheer there-ness. If Nothingness is analogous to the number '0', then it is possible to argue that this pre-number has the connotations of emptiness, enabling, (absolute) space creating, and even a kind of potency. This brings us back to the first paragraph in this essay, but in a transformed way. We have travelled from the common sensibility that Be-ness and Nothingness must be opposites in all respects, to the Hegelian vision that they must be fundamentally identical, to the third prospect that they are both identical and non-identical. In the esoteric realm of number it is possible to show that Nothingness is somewhat more basic than Be-ness, insofar as the zero is the ultimate enabling number for all positive and negative numbers.

Does Blavatsky grant privilege to Non-being over Be-ness? From certain Buddhist perspectives, this would be an appropriate move, especially since Nothingness or the Void is really the great womb (Plato's *chora* or enabling and gathering absolute space) of all of the ten thousand things. I am willing to conclude that Blavatsky does give Nothingness a slight privilege in the sense that

Non-being is the ultimate enabling condition for the positivity of Be-ness, the '1', and that Nothingness, as zero-ness, provides for the very possibility of trait-less Be-ness. Nothingness does not seem to be emergent from Be-ness, but it does make sense to argue that Be-ness as one-ness, since it is 'later' than zero-ness, can emerge from Nothingness, even if the two ultimates are still in some kind of identity relation. If this privileging of Non-Being occurs in *The Secret Doctrine*, what implications can be drawn from it?

Blavatsky does not seem to *want* to privilege Nothingness over Be-ness, yet this is the implication if her own analogy between the 'zero' and the 'one' is to be taken at face value. Following this clue, it is possible to show that the Buddhist experience of Non-Being serves, perhaps in a hidden way in the text, as the heart of the 'Unknown Root'. Yet she also believes in a cosmogenesis that does not come from some once-and-for-all divine act, but from a hidden, but seemingly necessary, emanation from Nothingness. It is as if Nothingness 'hungers' to create Be-ness, and, in turn, the innumerable universes. Blavatsky would surely reply that this argument could only work if one applies

temporal categories to that which is prior to time, that is, that Nothingness is earlier than Be-ness in the process of world formation. Yet her slight tilt towards Nothingness can also be looked at non-temporally. Whether neither Be-ness nor Non-being is temporal, there is a sense in which Nothingness is more dynamic in its self-othering. Against Be-ness cannot become Nothingness, but may be built into Non-Being to become Be-ness. Of course, the word 'becoming' cannot be taken literally or temporally. Perhaps this 'becoming' is more like the actualizing of pre-temporal potencies that rest in the great unconscious of Nature. Ultimately, the actualizing and the actualized are both identical and different, and this may be the profound insight at the heart of *The Secret Doctrine*.

It might even be the case that Blavatsky relies too much on her epistemological arguments for the identity of Be-ness and Nothingness. The ontological arguments may not have freed themselves from the constraints of the finite knowing relationship. Perhaps a more open ontological strategy would make it possible to see past the identity thesis into a relationship that is deeper and more infused with difference and the dynamism of Nothingness.

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4. Ibid., p. 53.
5. Ibid., p. 193.
6. Ibid., p. 45.
7. Ibid., p. 88. (A commentary on Stanza IV.1)