The Answer to the Question of Being

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1 Introduction

At the beginning of *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger famously asked the question of being: what is it to be?[1] The question was to exercise him, in one way or another, for the rest of his philosophical life. He came to the conclusion that because of a certain aporia the question could not, in fact, be answered. One cannot say what being is. Being shows itself; that is, beings show their being; and the job of the thinker is to open people's eyes to see this showing.[2]

Heidegger nothwithstanding, I think that the question of being *can* be answered, and the point of this essay is to do so. In the process we will also investigate the ground of Heidegger's aporia and its implications. These matters will involve a certain construction concerning unity and its possibility, in the shape of gluon theory.

In the next section we will look at Heidegger and his predicament more closely. I will then explain enough of the theory of gluons to make what follows intelligible. After that, we will be in a position to answer the question

[1]Some who translate Heidegger into English use a capital 'B' for being, and a lower case 'b' for beings. Though this has a certain point, it is entirely artifactual. In German, both words, being nouns, begin with capitals (*Sein, Seindes*). So I will not follow this practice, though I have not changed quotations that do so.

[2]This is spelled out in a number of later essays, such as 'The Origin of the Work of Art' and 'What Calls for Thinking?' (Krell (1977), chs. 3 and 9).

of being. In the final section will see how the theory of gluons explains Heidegger's aporia.

2 Heidegger

To start with, Heidegger.[3] Heidegger poses the question of being as follows:[4]

> What is asked about in the question to be elaborated is being, that which determines beings as beings, that in terms of which beings have always been understood no matter how they are discussed.

The being of a being, then, is what it is which makes it be.[5] And one thing that Heidegger is clear about from the very beginning is that being is not itself another being. As he puts it:[6]

> The being of beings 'is' not itself a being. The first philosophical step in understanding the problem of being consists in avoiding telling the *mython tina diegeisthai*, in not 'telling a story', that is, not determining beings as beings by tracing them back in their origins to another being—as if being had the character of a possible being.

He takes this to be so obvious that he does not give an argument for it in what follows. Indeed, it is actually hard to find arguments for the claim in the Heideggerian corpus. But one might essay a couple: one metaphysical, one grammatical.

The metaphysical one is Neo-Platonist. Being is the ground of beings. As such, it is not the *kind* of thing that can be a being. It can function as the ground only if it, itself, is beyond being, and so not a being.[7] The

[3]For a more detailed discussion of some of the following matters, see Priest (2002a), ch. 15.

[4]Stambaugh (1996), p. 4f.

[5]Heidegger is clear that being is always the being of a being. He was, as it were, an Aristotelian about this universal. Thus we have (Heidegger (2002), p. 61): 'If we think of the matter just a bit more rigorously, if we take more heed of what is in contest in the matter, we see that *Being* means always and everywhere: the Being of *beings*.'

[6]Stambaugh (1996), p. 5.

[7]Heidegger's discussion of being as ground can be found in 'The Essence of Ground' (McNeill (1998), pp. 97-135) and *The Principle of Reason* (Lilly, (1991)). See also the relevant discussions in Caputo (1986) and Braver (2012).

grammatical argument is somewhat different. We say, for example: *Heidegger is.* 'Heidegger' refers to an object, a being. If 'is' referred to a being then the italicized phrase would simply be a list of two objects: Heidegger and being. But it is clearly not a simple list. In an obvious sense, it has a unity that a pair of objects lacks. One can hear both of these arguments in the following passage:[8]

> If we painstakingly attend to the language in which we articulate what the principle of reason [*Satz vom Grund*] says as a principle of being, then it becomes clear we speak of being in an odd manner that is, in truth, inadmissible. We say: being and ground/reason [*Grund*] 'are' the same. Being 'is' the abyss [*Abgrund*]. When we say something 'is' and 'is such and so', then that something is, in such an utterance, represented as a being. Only a being 'is'; the 'is' itself—being—'is' not. The wall in front of you and behind me is. It immediately shows itself to us as something present. But where is its 'is'? Where should we seek the presencing of the wall? Probably these questions already run awry.

Whatever the reason, though, if being is not itself a being, we have a problem. If one is to answer the question of being one must say something of the form: *being is such and such.* This uses 'being' as a noun phrase, and so treats its referent as an object. It follows that one cannot answer the question of being. I take this insight to be what drives much of Heidegger's later thought (though, again, I am aware of nowhere he says this explicitly).[9] Being cannot be said; it can only be shown. If one has the eyes to see it, beings show their being. One's eyes can be opened by art, poetry, language—before it becomes a dead metaphor. As he says in 'On the Origins of the Work of Art':[10]

> The art work opens up in its own way the Being of beings. This opening up, i.e., this revealing, i.e., the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the art work, the truth of beings has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work.

[8] Lilly (1991), p. 51f.

[9] For some relevant discussion of the need for silence, see Sections 37 and 38 of *Contributions to Philosophy* (*of the Event*) (Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012)).

[10] Krell (1977), p. 166.

A solution to the question of being can, therefore, only consist in helping to open people's eyes in this way.

But discerning eyes will also perceive an aporia here. Never mind answering the question of being; if one cannot refer to being with a noun phrase, one cannot even ask it. ('What is being?') Indeed, for exactly this reason, one can say nothing at all of being. Yet, Heidegger's own works are replete with statements about being. (Just look at the quotes above.) To bend a comment from Russell's introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*—which finds itself with a similar aporia:[11] Everything involved in talking of being cannot, grammatically, be said. What may give some hesitation about this fact is that, despite his arguments to the contrary, Mr Heidegger manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said.

Heidegger was, of course, well aware of the problem, and he wrestled with various ways to avoid it. Thus, for example, he tried the technique of writing under erasure:[12]

> ...a thoughtful glance ahead into the realm of 'Being' can only write it as ~~Being~~. The crossed lines at first only repel, especially the almost ineradicable habit of conceiving 'Being' as something standing by itself... Nothingness would have to be written, and that means thought of, just like ~~Being~~.

The failure of this strategy is manifest, though. Heidegger has to talk about being in order to explain what it is that the erasure shows is not to be taken as standing by itself.

As far as I know, Heidegger never solved this problem. Maybe, having no cure, he learned to live with the disease. Or maybe, once he figured out that the action was in opening people's eyes in a certain way, it because irrelevant to explain what it is that is seen. As Zhangzi says (in a quite different context):[13]

> A fish-trap is for catching fish; once you've caught the fish, you can forget about the trap. A rabbit-snare is for catching rabbits; once you've caught the rabbit, you can forget about the snare. Words are for catching ideas; once you've caught the idea, you can forget about the words.

[11] Pears and McGuiness (1961), p. *xxi*.
[12] Kluback and Wilde (1959), p. 81.
[13] Mair (1994), p. 277.

3 Unity and Gluon Theory

So much for the Heideggerian background. Before we turn to the answer to the question of being, I need to explain the background theory that informs it. This concerns unity and what makes it possible. I shall not attempt to justify the theory here, or to show its technical coherence. I do that elsewhere.[14] I wish merely to explain the essence of the view in question.

Take an object with parts. What makes them into a single thing? There must be something in virtue of which they form a unity. Quite possibly, this thing depends on the unity in question. If the unity is a house, its parts are bricks, and maybe what makes them into a unity is their geometric configuration. If the unity is a symphony, its parts are notes, and maybe what makes them into a unity is their arrangement. But whatever the binding agent is, there must be one. Let us call it, neutrally, the *gluon* of the unity.

It does not take a lot of thought to see that gluons are very strange things: they appear to have contradictory properties. A gluon is an object: we can think about *it*, quantify over *it*, refer to *it*. But it is not an object: if it were, the totality comprising it and the other parts would be just as much a congeries as the parts themselves, and we would want for an explanation of how the unity is achieved. Think of Bradley's regress at this point. If the gluon were just another object, there would need to be a "hypergluon", holding the gluon and the other parts together. And so on... We are off on a vicious regress.

So the gluon is an object and not an object. But how is it that it holds all the parts (including itself) together? If it were distinct from the other parts, Bradley's regress would strike. It must, therefore, be identical with each of the other parts. How to make sense of this idea? We may define identity in the standard fashion, deploying Leibniz' identity of indiscernibles: $x = y$ is $\forall Z(Zx \equiv Zy)$, where the quantifier is second-order, and the connective is the material biconditional. Note, however, that we are dealing with objects some of which have contradictory properties. Hence this must be the material biconditional of some paraconsistent logic (a logic which tolerates contradictions without blowing up).[15]

So suppose that we have a unity; let its gluon be g, and let a, b, c, and d

[14] Priest (2014), chs. 1, 2.

[15] For a very non-technical introduction to paraconsistent logic, see Priest (1998); for a somewhat more technical account, see Priest (2008), ch. 7; for a very technical account, see Priest (2002b).

be its (other) parts. Then $g = a$, $g = b$, $g = c$, and $g = d$:

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} & & d & & \\ & & \shortparallel & & \\ a & = & g & = & c \\ & & \shortparallel & & \\ & & b & & \end{array}$$

This will happen if g has all the properties of a, b, c, and d. Naturally, since the parts are liable to have a variety of disparate properties, g is liable to be an inconsistent object—but we knew that already. Note, also, that in virtually all paraconsistent logics, the material biconditional is *not* transitive: $A \equiv B, B \equiv C \nvdash A \equiv C$. So the fact that $a = g$ and $g = b$ does not entail that $a = b$. The various parts are not, generally speaking, identical.

For a very simple illustration of how all this works, suppose that the parts are just a, b, and g, and that there is only one property at issue, P. Suppose that (consistently) Pa, $\neg Pb$, but that $Pg \wedge \neg Pg$. Then $Pa \equiv Pg$ and $Pg \equiv Pb$, but it is not the case that $Pa \equiv Pb$. Hence (since P is the only property at issue), $a = g$, $g = b$, but it is not the case that $a = b$. Note, also that since $Pg \wedge \neg Pg$, it follows that $\neg Pg \equiv Pg$, and so $\exists X \neg (Xg \equiv Xg)$, and $\neg \forall X (Xg \equiv Xg)$. That is, $g \neq g$: g is not self-identical.

Finally, and importantly for what follows, gluons are and are not objects/beings.[16] To say that something is an object is to say that it is something: $\exists y\, y = x$. This follows from the logical truth that $x = x$. So every x is an object. Everything is a being, gluons included. But as we have just seen, if g is a gluon, then $g \neq g$. But if $g \neq g$ then, for any y, $y \neq g$. For either $y = g$ or $y \neq g$. And in the first case the result follows by the substitutivity of identicals. (Substitute y for g in the first occurrence of $g \neq g$.) Hence, $\forall y \neg y = g$. That is, $\neg \exists y\, y = g$; that is, g is not an object.

4 The Answer to the Question

We are now in a position to answer the question of being.[17] But first, we need to be clear about the sense of being involved. To be a being for Heidegger

[16] Strictly speaking, this is guaranteed only for objects with multiple parts. As far as Heidegger goes, I think we can simply assume that all objects have parts. What to say about objects with no parts, simpleces, is discussed in Priest (2014), ch. 4.

[17] The matter is discussed at greater length in Priest (2014), ch. 4.

is simply to be an object; that is, to be anything that one can think of, predicate something of, refer to. As Heidegger says:[18]

> Everything we talk about, mean, and are related to is in being in one way or another. What and how we ourselves are is also a being. Being is found in thatness and whatness, reality, the objective presence of things [*Vorhandenheit*], subsistence, validity, existence [*Da-sein*], and in the 'there is' [*es gibt*].

And:[19]

> Being is used in all knowledge and all predicating, in every relation to beings and in every relation to oneself, and the expression is understandable without 'further ado.' Everyone understands 'The sky is blue,' 'I am happy,' and similar statements.

That is, to be a being/object, is, in Meinongian terms, to have *Sosein*.[20]

Given this understanding of being, it is clear that being and unity come to the same thing. If something is an object, it is one thing; and if it is one thing, it is certainly an object. The thought is, in fact, as old as Aristotle. As he puts it (*Met.* 1003^b 23-31):[21]

> ...being and unity are the same and are one thing in the sense that they are implied by one another as principle and cause are ... ; for one man and a man are the same thing and [man who is] and a man are the same thing, and the doubling of the words in 'one man' and 'one [man who is]' does not give any new meaning ...; and similarly with 'one', so that it is obvious that the addition in these cases means the same thing, and unity is nothing other than being...

And again (*Met.* 1054^a13-19):

> And that in a sense unity means the same as being is clear from the fact that it follows the categories in as many ways, and is not

[18]Stambaugh (1996), p. 5.

[19]Heidegger (1996), p. 5.

[20]See Priest (201+).

[21]The translation from Barnes (1984), except that 'man who is' is my rendering of the text's 'existent man'. This, I think, is more accurate.

> comprised within any category, e.g. neither in substance nor in quality, but is related to them just as being is; and from the fact that in 'one man' nothing more is predicated than in 'man', just as being is nothing apart from substance or quality or quantity; and to be one is just to be a particular thing.

The thought is expressed—in more pellucid terms—by Plotinus, at the beginning of *Ennead* VI, 9:[22]

> It is in virtue of unity that beings are beings.
>
> This is equally true of things whose existence is primal and of all those that are in any degree to be numbered among beings. What could exist at all except as one thing? Deprived of unity, a thing ceases to be what it is called: no army unless a unity: a chorus, a flock, must be one thing. Even house and ship demand unity, one house, one ship; unity gone, neither remains; thus even continuous magnitudes could not exist without inherent unity; break them apart and their very being is altered in the measure of the breach of unity.
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> Take a plant and animal; the material form stands a unity; fallen from that into a litter of fragments, the things have lost their being; what was is no longer there; it is replaced by quite other things—as many others, precisely as possess unity.

To be, then, is exactly *to be one*.

One might object. It would seem that we have plural forms of reference. Thus, we can say, for example, that Russell and Whitehead wrote *Principia Mathematica*, and that *they* were in Cambridge together at the time. The conjunctive noun-phrase and pronoun appear to refer to objects that are inherently plural. Similarly, one can say that something is a square; but one also can say that *some things* have the same shape as each other. The italicized quantifier is plural, and refers to a plurality.[23] There are, then, objects that are, but are not one, being a plurality. *Russell and Whitehead*, for example is (an object), but it is not one object.

The reply is simple, however. The machinery does not allow us to refer to objects which are plural, but to a plurality of objects. Thus, when we say

[22] Translation from MacKenna (1991), pp 535-6.

[23] See, e.g., Yi (2005).

that Russell and Whitehead wrote *Principia*, we are not referring to some strange object, *Russell and Whitehead*; we are referring to Russell and to Whitehead. (One cannot say: 'Russell and Whitehead wrote *Principia*, and *it* was in Cambridge at the time.) Similarly if we use plural pronouns and quantification we are referring to multiple objects. If something is, it is one, a unity; and if some things are, they are ones, unities. The machinery of plural reference does indeed enable one to refer to a plurality of objects, but each is one. So to be is still to be one.

Let us now put all these thoughts together. The being of something is that in virtue of which it is. To be is to be one. So the being of something is that in virtue of which it is one. And what is it in virtue of which something is one? By definition, its gluon, g. The being of something is therefore its gluon. We have answered Heidegger's question as to the nature of being.[24] (To be clear about the exact form of this argument used here: We have established that the conditions 'x is one thing' and 'x is' are necessarily equivalent. Hence, the inference: 'g makes it the case that x is one thing; hence g makes it the case that x is' is an application of the substitutivity of such equivalents.)

5 Heidegger's Aporia

We are not finished yet. We still have to deal with Heidegger's aporia. He is forced to talk about what cannot be talked about. How so? We are now in a position to see how.

The being of any object/being, x, is its gluon. A gluon both is and is not an object/being. Since it is an object, it can have a name 'α' ('the being of x') Hence, one can talk about it, by saying things like 'α is not a being'.

But it is not an object/being as well. Since it is not an object, it cannot have a name. And if it cannot have a name, one cannot refer to it, and so one can say nothing about it. That, of course, is a contradiction. But that is exactly the terrain we are in.[25]

[24] And if a Heideggerian wants to object that the being of a being is not a unity, the reply is: Of course: it is not an object! But it is both an object and a one for all that. (You can, after all, speak of *it*.) That is the aporia.

[25] Priest (2002a), ch. 15, argues that Heidegger *should have been* a dialetheist. In his forthcoming PhD thesis (University of St Andrews) Filippo Casati, drawing on some of Heidegger's later writings that have been translated only recently into English, argues that

We can, in fact, make the matter quite precise. The intuitively correct principle governing truth is the T-schema. For every sentence, A:

- 'A' is true iff (if and only if) A

Thus, 'Socrates was human' is true iff Socrates was indeed human. Analogously, the intuitively correct principle governing denotation is the D-schema. For every name, 'n':

- 'n' denotes x iff $n = x$

Thus, 'Socrates' denotes Plato's teacher iff Socrates is Plato's teacher.

Now, since α is not an object, $\neg\exists x\, x = \alpha$. That is $\forall x\, x \neq \alpha$. So in particular, if '$n$' is any name, $n \neq \alpha$. So by the D-schema (and contraposition), 'n' does not denote α. α has no name. Hence, one can say nothing about it, for to say something about it, one has to have some name to refer to it.

Heidegger was right, then, in his conclusion that one cannot say anything about the being of an object (even though one can)! And in case one thinks this is some peculiarity of Heideggerian philosophy, it is worth nothing that the very same situation occurs in some paradoxes of self-reference.

Thus, take König's Paradox.[26] This concerns ordinals. Ordinals are numbers that extend the familiar counting numbers, 0, 1, 2, ... beyond the finite. Thus, after all the finite numbers there is a next, ω, and then a next, $\omega + 1$, and so on. Crucially, ordinal numbers preserve the property of the counting numbers that any non-empty collection of them has a least member. How far, exactly, the ordinals go is a somewhat vexed question, both mathematically and philosophically, but it is not contentious that there are many more ordinals than can be referred to by names of a language with a finite vocabulary, such as English. This can be shown by a perfectly rigorous mathematical proof. Now, if there are ordinals that cannot be referred to in this way, then, by the properties of the ordinals, there must be a least. Consider the phrase 'the least ordinal that cannot be referred to'. This obviously refers to the number in question, and one can use it to say things about it, such as that it is the least ordinal that cannot be referred to. Yet, since it cannot be referred to, one can say nothing of it. In this regard, it is just like a gluon, and in particular, the being of an object.

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he actually *become* one—at least in private.

[26] See, e.g., Priest (2002a), pp. 131-4.

6 And So...

We have answered Heidegger's *Seinsfrage*. The being of a being is its gluon. Heidegger was just wrong to give up trying to answer the question. (Of course, the fact that being can be said does not—Wittgenstein notwithstanding—mean that it cannot be shown. I can tell you what a cricket bat is *and* show you one.) The answer, it must be admitted, uses the techniques of modern mathematical logic, and in particular paraconsistent logic, something that Heidegger could have know little about, since he died just about the time that this was being invented. The answer is none the worse for that.

None the less, Heidegger was right in insisting that the being of a being is not itself an object/being, and in concluding that one could therefore say nothing about it. The answer to the question of being requires us to talk of the ineffable. Being is indeed a strange beast.

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