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The banality of Being and Becoming

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Abstract:

Throughout the history of philosophy there seems to be a distinction between or among schools of thought. For instance, idealism and materialism or behaviourism and natural predisposition. This article deals with the distinction between Being and Becoming demonstrating not only its importance, but also its internationality, as it appears that the distinction between Being and Becoming, which often takes the form of rivalry, does not concern Western philosophy alone, but it can be found, though under different forms, in the East, too. Several examples will show that, one way or another, the differentiation between the unborn, undead, perfect Being and the everlasting, never-ending Becoming go beyond the rivalry between the Monists (Parmenides, Zeno, Melissus) and Heraclitus. Please be advised that this article will only try to present this matter based on specific examples from the history of philosophy from Greece, India, and China. As it becomes understandable such a matter can (or should) be dealt with in a much larger scale, perhaps as the topic of a doctoral thesis.

Keywords: Becoming, Being, idealism, materialism, behaviourism, natural predisposition, history of philosophy, Greece, India, China

Introduction

This article will give examples from philosophical schools in Greece, India, and China that indicate that the distinction between Being and Becoming is a cliché beyond the boundaries of Western tradition. In addition, it is essential to point out that in the West the philosophical texts of ancient India and ancient China are translated into the western languages and thus they carry some sort of subjectivity in terms of how the translator has decided to translate some key-terms, such as Being and Becoming. With Sanskrit this may not be that serious, since Sanskrit is still an Indo-European language, and it does bear some resemblances to the western languages. Old Chinese, on the other hand, requires a great deal of attention and even then, the reader should keep in mind that ancient Chinese is not that common for scholars to know, let alone translate philosophical texts. Thus, we should take extra care when we come across terms like Being, Becoming, existence, virtue etc., since the signified may have been translated in such a way in order to match what the translator had in mind, but it may refer to a different signifier in the original text.

Greece

In Greece philosophy began as the observation of the natural world in an attempt to further comprehend how the world is structured and how it functions. The cosmogonic myths of Hesiod, the stories in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and the Orphic hymns gave way to the (more) scientific manner of the Milesians starting with Thales¹. The concept of becoming is, however, much more evident in Thales' student, Anaximander, who first spoke of the *apeiron*, a non-tangible element that

¹ Kirk G. S., Raven J. E., Schofield M., *The pre-Socratic philosophers* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1987 (e. p. 1957), 27-32.

cannot be destroyed², which Kirk, Raven, Schofield interpreted as a concept of space in terms of that it is the substance in which the world is composed and dissolved³. Almost likewise, Anaximenes set the air and the *apeiron* as the first principles of the cosmos, which is a combination of something material, like Thales' water and something immaterial, like Anaximander's *apeiron*.

However, the basic protagonists of the distinction between Being and Becoming are, of course, Parmenides and Heraclitus respectively. The difference in their thought has often been considered "radical"⁴, while Nehamas has attempted to compromise them by arguing that the two philosophers "*share an ontological picture apart from their epistemological views*"⁵. Moreover, Nehamas claimed that "*Heraclitus' fire, understood as change, satisfies Parmenides' signposts, as it is ungenerated, imperishable, whole, one, and indivisible, perfect and complete and that he turns out to be 'more Parmenidean than Parmenides himself' for 'he is more of a monist than the great monist himself'*"⁶. Although there does not seem to be a reason to take it that far, I personally would like to emphasise the fact that despite the different approach on the matter of the Being, there is still room for similarities in a way that Parmenides and Heraclitus may differ less than their ontological fragments have led us to believe. Apart from the epistemological views and the association of the Heraclitean fire with the Parmenidean Being mentioned above, the inability of man to comprehend the

² *Apeiron*: from the Greek work peras (end) and the prefix -a, a signifier of opposition. Apeiron is the Greek word for the Latin *infinitum* (in + finis).

³ Kirk G. S., Raven J. E., Schofield M., *The pre-Socratic philosophers* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1987 (e. p. 1957), 60.

⁴ *...the two most philosophical Pre-Socratics propound the two most radically different philosophies: Heraclitus the philosopher of flux and Parmenides the philosopher of changelessness...*, Graham, D.: "Heraclitus and Parmenides" in V. Caston and D. Graham (eds.) *Presocratic Philosophy, Essays in honour of Alexander Mourelatos*, Aldershot, Ashgate, (2002): 27-44, 27.

⁵ Nehamas A.: "Parmenidean Being/Heraclitean Fire", in V. Caston and D. Graham (eds.) *Presocratic Philosophy, Essays in honour of Alexander Mourelatos*, Aldershot, Ashgate, (2002), 45-64, 47.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 51.

Logos can be seen as the “confusing unjustified distinctions” in Parmenides according to Beatriz Bossi⁷ (whereas this may be included in the epistemological field mentioned above, anyway).

The notion of Being in Parmenides is found in his *On Nature* (*Περὶ Φύσιος*). The chariot brings the poet before the gates of Truth (*Αλήθεια*) where the goddess teaches the concept of thought (*νοεῖν*), which is that the Being is the only real thing and that one cannot know, let alone express, the non-Being⁸ (chapter II). Moreover, in the third book (from which only one phrase is left) we learn that the result of thought is the Being itself, as one would be unable to think of something that does not exist (...*το γὰρ αὐτό νοεῖν ἐστὶ τε καὶ εἶναι*), which brings to mind the concept of logic in Wittgenstein from *Tractatus*⁹. On the other hand, the notion of Becoming is mostly associated with Heraclitus. The notion of Becoming does not at all deny that of Being; it only conceives the Being within the immanence of motion, as something that exists thanks to or owing to its constant movement. Hence, one can notice some room for compromise. For instance, Jean Brun understands the idea of Becoming as returning (*revenir*), instead of precisely becoming (*devenir*)¹⁰; in this respect, we are not dealing with a Becoming of the Being, but rather with a Becoming, which is part of the Being. According to William Ralph Inge, more widely known as Dean Inge, *eternity does*

⁷ The view of those Heraclitean deaf who do not ‘listen’ to the account of logos (and cannot interpret the data due to their incapacity to perceive the unity of the real) seems quite similar to the Parmenidean mortals who make confusing unjustified distinctions. (What Heraclitus and Parmenides have in common on Reality and Deception Lo que Heráclito y Parménides tienen en común acerca de la realidad y el engaño: Bossi B., Universidad Complutense de Madrid, LOGOS. *Anales del Seminario de Metafísica* Vol. 48 (2015): 21-34, 34. (Verdenius also compares Heraclitus’ claim about the damp soul (like a drunkard who does not know where he goes) to Parmenides’ wandering man in Verdenius, W.J.: *Parmenides, Some Comments on his Poem*, Amsterdam, Hakkert, (1964): 29.

⁸ Parmenides, *On nature* (Thessaloniki: ZITROS, 2003).

⁹ Wittgenstein L., *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, U.S.A: Routledge 2001) 3.03.

¹⁰ Brun J., *Les Presocratiques*, e. p. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France – PUF, 1982), 42.

*not mean existence at all times, but existence independently from time, without past or future*¹¹. The constant motion prevents us from entering the same river twice¹². Moreover, the notion of Becoming is given as a circle, the fundamental feature of which is the equality, since the beginning and the end on the circle are the same or rather, one might say, there is no such thing as beginning and end¹³. This point bares some resemblance to the *On Nature's* fifth book (again only one phrase left), where Parmenides says that it doesn't matter where the goddess will start from, since she will end up at the same point anyway¹⁴.

As far as the rest of the pre-Socratic philosophers are concerned, it can be claimed that they all, more or less, became part of this conflict. Thus, the Pythagorians should be included in the school of Becoming as well as Empedocles, who constructed their philosophical ideas upon the concept of continuity and change. For the formers the idea of reincarnation and the immortal soul and for the latter the circular scheme of the interchangeable action of the diptych Philotis-Neikos provide enough evidence to place them in the school of Becoming, although several have spoken of the influence of Parmenides on Empedocles¹⁵. The rest of the triad of Elea, Zeno and Melissus, should obviously go with the school of Being, yet Zeno's dialectical approach, especially given with the paradoxes, may suggest that the influence of Parmenides was not as strong. On the contrary, Melissus, Parmenides' other pupil, seems to follow his teacher's basic argumentation on the perfection of the Being and the rejection of the non-Being, without this suggesting lack of originality in his ideas. Lastly, as far as the pre-Socratics are concerned, we ought to include the Atomics in the category of the Being, since

¹¹ Russell B., *A history of Western philosophy*, (New York: Simon & Shuster, Inc., 1945).

¹² Heraclitus, DK, B, 91.

¹³ Heraclitus, DK, B, 103.

¹⁴ ξυγὸν δέ μοί ἐστιν,

ὀππότεν ἄρξωμαι· τόθι γὰρ πάλιν ἴξωμαι αὖθις.

¹⁵ Kirk G. S., Raven J. E., Schofield M., *The pre-Socratic philosophers* (Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 1987, e. p. 1957).

the idea of a particle that cannot be further divided (atom) matches to a large extent that of the Being.

The Being-Becoming distinction carried on even after the centre of the spiritual blossom moved from Ionia and Sicily to Athens. The dominant figures in 5th century Athens are Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, although there are no written sources from Socrates¹⁶. Since there is hardly any topic left out from the dialogues, it is anything but easy to place Plato in a specific category, not just regarding the topic of this article, but in general. Several elements for the dialogues suggest that Plato is a fan of the idea of an unmovable, unborn, and everlasting Being, while others suggest that he believes in the everlasting continuity of change (Becoming). For instance, could the idea of Agathon (Αγαθόν), appearing in several dialogues, be the idea of the Parmenidean Being, only in other words? Is Plato guilty as charged of patricide against Parmenides in the homonym dialogue or was the whole dialogue a demonstration of irony? Given the fact that Plato is very fond of irony (in many cases this is apparent), it is far from easy to tell. In *Meno* the slave remembers to draw the line that divides the square in two triangles, a suggestion indicating memory of a past life according to Socrates, but what does this mean? Is the soul eternal and immortal and thus a symbolism of the Being or does the immortal soul go into a mortal body after the biological death and thus it symbolises the concept of Becoming, not much unlike the idea found in *Phaedon* and at the post-mortem adventure of the soul in the diegesis of Er, son of Armenius, at the end of the *Republic*?

The same dilemma goes for Aristotle. In *Metaphysics* (A) Aristotle wonders whether the first principle is to be associated with the essence, the matter or the source of motion (983 a), while he later questions whether the Being should be identified as the One (Έν) (1001 a). Later in *Metaphysics* (1001 b) and in *Physics* (A, 186 b) Aristotle rejects the idea of the Being and the One being the same thing, a clear indication that he

¹⁶ However, Epictetus in his second *Discourse* (Διατριβή Β') suggests that Socrates did write some works, which were lost. The fact that Epictetus and Socrates were more than 500 years apart makes this source rather unreliable.

misunderstood the symbolistic character of the Eleatic school, particularly the paradoxes of Zeno.

India

Although the examples that could be drawn from Greek philosophy are innumerable, we shall now move on to examples that show how classical Indian philosophy has also made the distinction between Being and Becoming, keeping in mind that the difference in mentality between India and the West is related to the differentiation in how the two civilisations conceive the humane¹⁷.

Hindu philosophy is strongly related to the Hindu pantheon and the level of spirituality seems so strongly attached to the philosophical ideas, that the two are often impossible to distinguish. *Prima facie*, the western tradition has been the attempt for a rational explanation of the cosmos, while Indian philosophy seems to have remained in a broader, metaphysical stage. Nonetheless, this is rather an understatement. The notion of rationalism exists anyway regardless the tradition. There is always logic in how the one or the other philosophical school perceives the cosmos, the divine or any other element under the philosophical microscope. For reasons other than philosophy, which are not to be discussed here as they involve sociopolitical and economic factors, the notion of rationalism has been associated almost exclusively with the West and in addition it has been a means of expressing the (fake) superiority of the West over the East.

The philosophy of India has been dominated by the philosophical principles of Brahmanism from the Vedas to the Aranyakas until their philosophically elegant version, the Upanishads. Thus, other philosophical traditions that were considered heterodox, since they did not accept the truth of the Vedas, were excluded. Buddhism, Jainism and Charvaka (materialism) never managed to settle in India. As far as the topic of this article is concerned, it may be said that the

¹⁷ David White, *The Bhagavad-Gita* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1993, e. p. 1989), 5.

distinction between Being and Becoming is less obvious than in Greece, but can still be drawn based on some specific elements.

What could account for the philosophical tradition of Being in India? As what could the Being be identified? The first thing that would come to one's mind is the concept of *moksha*. Moksha is the salvation from the circle of the reincarnations (in Buddhism this circle is called *samsara*) and in this respect Hinduism could be considered as a soteriological religion. However, the concept of moksha, in my opinion, should be seen as a symbolism for the never-ending effort of man to achieve it. In other words, the true meaning of moksha is not to achieve it, but rather to constantly walk towards the road that leads to salvation. Here I argue that the actual distinction between Being and Becoming in Indian philosophy is the contrast between the Brahman and its manifestation, the Trimurti. As an example of analogy, if for Heraclitus the law of Becoming is something permanent¹⁸, obviously contradicting the very idea of becoming, for Indian philosophy the Brahman contradicts the trifold concept of Trimurti. Brahman symbolises the notion of Being in the sense that it is unborn, undead and it represents the totality, since it exists in every particle of the world, something which reminds us of the idea of Being in Parmenides. The Trimurti, on the other hand, reminds us of Heraclitus and the concept of Becoming. The Trimurti consists of three gods who act as one, but with different tasks. Brahma¹⁹ is the Creator, Vishnu is the Preserver and Shiva is the Destroyer. The Brahman does not leave its place to Trimurti, it still exists, but through the Trimurti. As one may easily speculate, the ideas of creation, maintenance, and destruction are not to be taken literally. Creation does not mean *ex nihilo* creation, maintenance does not last for ever and destruction does not imply something permanent. Brahma creates the world in order to last for some time thanks to Vishnu until Shiva destroys it only for Brahma to create it

¹⁸ Wedberg Anders, *A history of philosophy, v. 1, antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 21.

¹⁹ Brahma, the first god of the Trimurti, is spelled without a final -n and it must not be confused with the Brahman.

again. Thus, the concept of creation must be understood as constant creation, the concept of maintenance as ephemeral and the concept of destruction as an opportunity for creation.

Even if we accept the Brahman – Trimurti as the Indian version of the Being – Becoming conflict, the question that comes naturally is this: Does this change with the bhakti movement? It has been argued that the bhakti movement, the devotion to one specific god of the Indian pantheon, is the bridge between the polytheism of the Rig-Veda to monism²⁰. I personally see the idea of Edgerton's monism in the post-bhakti era as a different version of the classical polytheism, not as monism per se, since the god to which the devotee chooses to devote himself to does not abolish the rest of the pantheon; the personal god represents all the gods of the classical Hinduism, including the Brahman. The two basic branches of bhakti are Shivaism (devotion to Shiva) and Vishnuism (devotion to Vishnu). Vishnuism begins with the *Bhagavad-Ghita*, where Arjuna discovers that Krishna, the manifestation of Vishnu, is the absolute god and that if Arjuna devotes himself totally to Krishna, he will automatically devote himself to Brahman (and, obviously, this includes the whole pantheon.). The problem that prevents man from understanding the true nature of the god (Arjuna's problem in the case of the *Bhagavad-Ghita*) is a problem of human nature, a problem of ignorance of our true nature, as it has been mentioned²¹. Let us return to the initial question: Does the distinction between the Being and the Becoming change with the bhakti movement? If the personal god (e. g. Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Ghita*) had taught the abolishment of every other god and that the acceptance of the one god is man's ticket to heaven, then we could, indeed, accept the end of the Being-Becoming conflict in Indian philosophy. However, this is hardly the case. As Krishna teaches Arjuna, he (Krishna) took up the role of Arjuna's charioteer before the battle of Kuruksetra in order to restore the fallen ethical code and also

²⁰ Edgerton Franklin, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, (ed. & tr.), (U.S.A.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 113.

²¹ Vaish N. C., *Musings on the BG* (Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2001, e. p. 1936), 3.

to secure his reign. Nevertheless, Krishna's reign does not abolish the other gods, Krishna incorporates them, including the Brahman. Hence, Arjuna (and, indeed, whoever is devoted to Krishna) will still be devoted to the Brahman and to the Trimurti, but through Krishna. In addition, Krishna teaches Arjuna not to fear to engage in the battle (Arjuna has got second thoughts as he sees his next-of-kin standing opposite ready to fight), because *never was there a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor all these kings; nor in the future shall any of us cease to be*²². The immanence of existence associates with the Being, while the human perception of life associates with the Becoming. In other words, Krishna, Arjuna and all these kings have always existed, but Arjuna cannot fully comprehend it, because he perceives death as something final, rather than a rapture in the continuation, as Krishna is trying to teach him.

China

Chinese philosophy has been a living organism for more than 2,500 years. Although many schools of philosophy flourished during the development of the Chinese civilisation (there was even an era called the Hundred Schools of Thought during the Spring and Autumn Era and the Warring States Period that shows the variety of different schools of thought) only two schools are dominant: Daoism and Confucianism. However, before Lao-Zi and Confucius, there was the era of the *Yi-jing*, the *Book of Changes*, which can be considered the pre-philosophical era of China. The title speaks for itself: the main philosophical idea in this classic is the idea of change and this idea dominates the whole book, the initial purpose of which was fortune-telling. The idea of Being is still present and in fact there is even the idea that the Being derives from the non-Being²³, with the productive aid from the Yin-Yang

²² *Bhagavad-Ghita*, 2.12.

²³ Chang Chi-yun, *Chinese philosophy*, v.3 (Beijing: Confucianism and other schools, Chinese Culture University Press, 1984), 300.

complex²⁴. Prima facie, we can only assume that Parmenides would strongly disapprove of this book, yet if we consider the non-Being as the primal cosmogonic force, then we are driven to think of the non-Being assuming the place of the Parmenidean Being. Thus, it can be assumed that the conflict between the Being and the Becoming appears in the *Yi-jing*, although it is still very early for one to speak of different schools of thought.

In the 6th century Taoism appears and Lao-zi is considered the mythical founder of this school of philosophy that has been so strongly associated with the concept of change. A little later Confucianism emerged, and Confucius from Lun (modern-day Qufu, Shandong) shaped the political theory of China and indeed southeast Asia with his ideas being, more or less, present to this day. Although classical Taoism focused more on the metaphysical aspect and Confucianism on the political structure of the state and the relations between the emperor and the citizens and among the citizens, the two schools are not as distinct as one might think. Both schools make use of the term Tao/Dao, which confuses things as to how each school interprets it. In fact, it has been argued that every school in ancient China had a unique version of the Tao²⁵ and that Taoism lacked the social character of Confucianism and for this it failed to win the hearts of the Chinese from the start²⁶, as did Confucianism. Moreover, Confucius in his *Analects* talks about the notion of flux as well as that of harmony quite a few times and Lao-zi in his *Dao De Jing* refers to the political or the moral aspects. Hence, it cannot be said that the distinction between Being and Becoming in China refers to the distinction between Confucianism and Taoism. The conflict between Being and Becoming are both related to Taoism whatsoever.

In Taoism the distinction receives a different form in the sense that the Tao is the basis of both the Being and the Becoming. According to the beginning of the *Dao De Jing* the

²⁴ Ibidem, 306.

²⁵ Cheng Ann (Paris: *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, Seuil, 2014), 35.

²⁶ Wei Francis C. M., *The spirit of Chinese culture* (New York: Charles Scribner's & sons, 1947), 68.

Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao²⁷; this ironic statement defines the true identity of Tao: Tao is the supreme, the eternal, but only for as long as man attempts to understand it and to conquer it. In other words, the Chinese Being owes its supremacy to the Becoming; Tao is supreme for as long as man chases it. The end of the flux means the end of the being of Tao, since as soon as one grasps it, one will come to the realisation that the real thing is still out there and that what he has grasped is but a chimera. The idea of Becoming in Chinese philosophy has often been associated with water, which, thanks to its nature, brings us closer to the Tao, explains Francois Jullien²⁸.

It is change where the value of Tao lies, not the ex-nihilo creation²⁹ and in this respect the concept of Being and that of Becoming in Taoism should be seen not in the sense of conflict, as for instance in Parmenides and Heraclitus, but in terms of coalition.

Conclusion

By and large, it can be claimed that the concept of Being and the concept of Becoming are the two dominant concepts in philosophy. However, it is often considered a Western privilege to think in a manner that separates the two. This article has attempted to demonstrate that this conflict (to whichever extent it can be considered as conflict) between Being and Becoming does not concern Western tradition alone, but can be spotted in the philosophy of the East as well. As mentioned in the abstract it would be an impossible task to include all the examples from all the philosophers from all three countries throughout a period of more than a millennium so as to support the line of argumentation expressed here.

²⁷ *Dao De Jing*, 1.1.

²⁸ Jullien Francois, *A treatise on efficacy; between western and Chinese thinking* (tr. by Janet Lloyd) (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2004, e. p. Grasset 1996), 170.

²⁹ Burik Steven, Thinking on the edge; Heidegger, Derrida and the Taoist getaway, Steven Burik, *Philosophy East & West* (499-516), University of Hawaii Press v. 60, No 4, (October 2010) 499.

Nevertheless, the volume of the written sources and the richness of the ideas should not be an obstacle for future academic research on this topic, which can be dealt with in the form of a monograph or, perhaps, a doctoral thesis.

Based on the above ideas presented and analysed, this article reaches the following conclusions:

1. The distinction between Being and Becoming has been the case since antiquity in Greece, India, and China, though with several differences. Thus, it is not to be considered a characteristic feature of Western tradition alone.

2. The distinction is far clearer in the pre-Socratics, with Parmenides and Heraclitus being considered as the *crème de la crème* of this conflict. Moreover, the limited sources on the philosophy of that era may allow us a general view of their ideas, but the poetic manner of Parmenides' *On Nature* and the fragmental structure of Heraclitus make it hard to come to specific conclusions. The obviously snobbish character of Heraclitus isn't helpful at all.

3. The distinction between Being and Becoming in India is found in the relationship between the Brahman and the Trimurti, which is the manifestation of the Brahman.

4. In China the distinction is not as strong since the Tao is the basis for both the Being and the Becoming. The distinction should be seen as coalition rather than sheer conflict.

5. In Chinese philosophy the matter of the cliché of Being and Becoming can be spotted in Taoism, whereas the social character of Confucianism complicates things as to whether the same (or a similar) distinction lies in Confucianism, too.

Epilogue

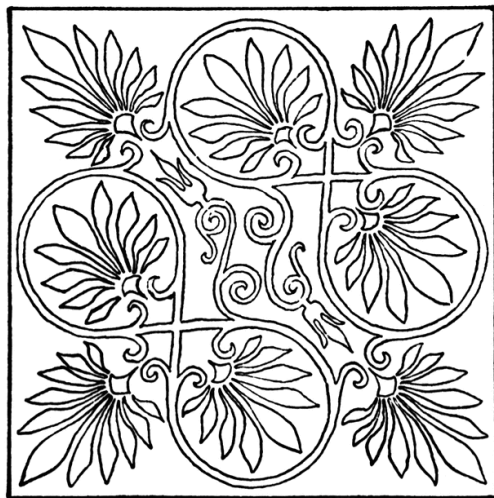
Prima facie, be advised that it may appear that this article has failed to indicate which philosopher falls into which

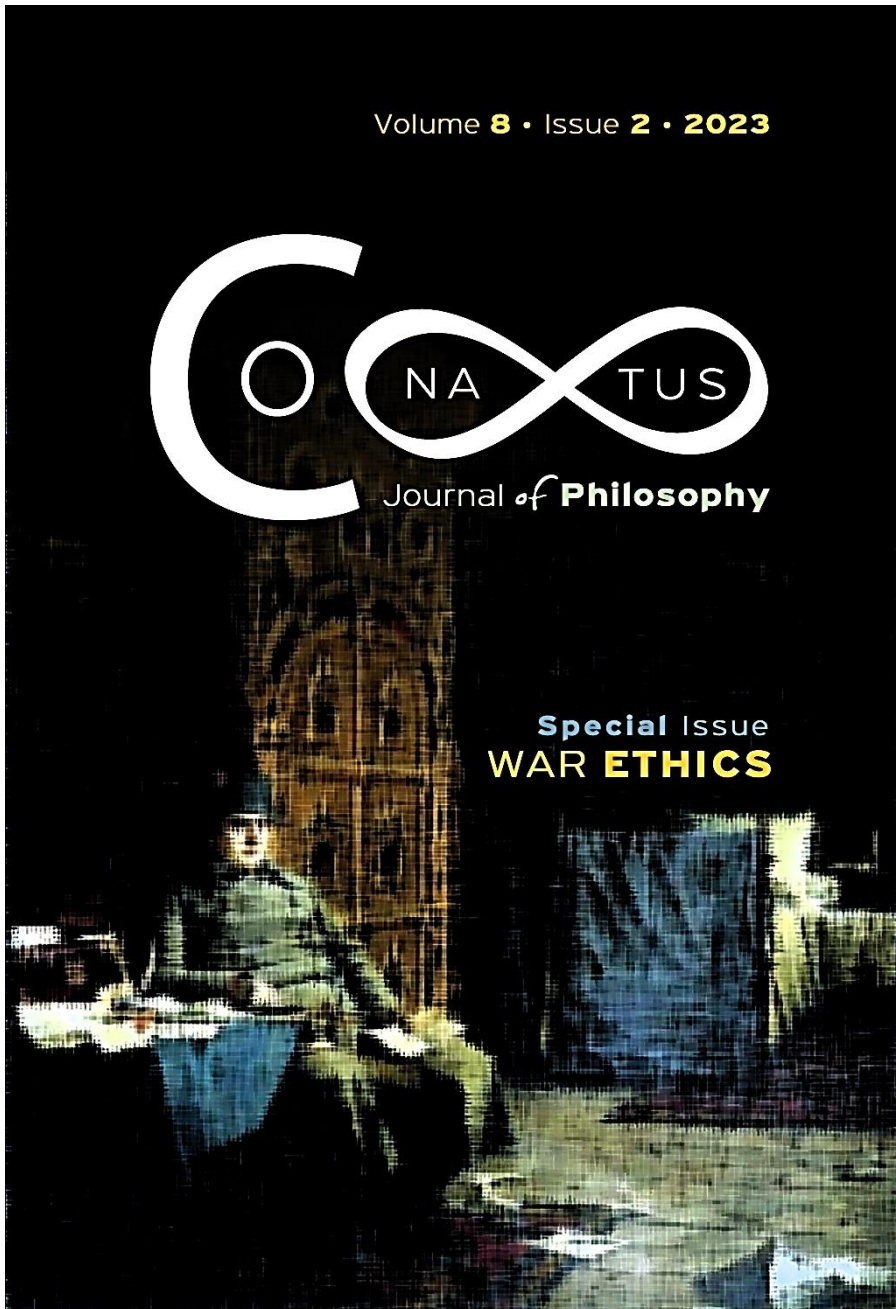
category as with Plato and Aristotle, other than the obvious (e. g. Parmenides – Heraclitus). However, let us take into account that this was not what the article was all about. The main concern of the article was to demonstrate that the distinction between the philosophical schools of Being and Becoming has been dominating philosophy since antiquity and that this “cliché” has been the case for India and China, too. I tried to stick to the initial idea as much as possible leaving out examples from other schools of philosophy or other eras, including those who attempted to associate the Being with the divine element in early Islamic philosophy, such the resemblance between the Being of Parmenides and Allah in Ibn-Arabi or the connection between the eternal motion and the first mover in Ibn-Rushd (Averroes). I hope that this article has promoted academic research in the field, as I am left with the impression that there has been little research regarding what appears to me as a quite interesting topic.

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