On Being and What There Is: 
Indian Perspectives on the 
Question of Being

Comparative Philosophy

“What is being?” In the fourth-century B.C. Aristotle says about this question that it “was raised of old and is raised now and always, and is always the subject of inquiry,” and he designs the classical and paradoxical idea of “a science which investigates being as being, and the attributes which belong to it according to its own nature.” More than 2,000 years later we may acknowledge that the question is still with us. Yet we are in doubt with regard not only to its answer, but also to its meaning and status as a question, and to its very questionability. In fact, we may say that one of the more remarkable ways in which the question of being persists today is the question: Is there a question?

“The question is: Is being a mere word and its meaning a vapor, or does what is designated by the word ‘being’ hold within it the historical destiny of the West?” Whether it is the “historical destiny of the West” or only a symptomatically Western misunderstanding, it is obviously correct that the question of being, as an explicit theme and program, and as framework of a philosophical discipline, has been formulated only in the West, initially by the Greeks. Among those who emphasize this today, critical, and even reductionist, tendencies are prevailing. Very often the interest in the question is nothing more than an interest in relating it to the contingencies of its historical occurrence, and, more specifically, in revealing its linguistic relativity: The history of “ontology” is claimed as a test case for demonstrating the linguistic conditions of philosophical ideas and problems; the ambiguous grammar of the verb to be, with its confusion of existential and copula functions, appears as the source and real depth of the intricacies traditionally associated with the question of being. The study of language, both as structural and logical analysis and as empirical study of their actual variety, seems to be more fundamental than the study of being (understood as ‘being’) itself. J.W.M. Verhaar expresses his
confidence that such an inventory of linguistic varieties "will provide some of the necessary foundational material for research in logic, the theory of knowledge, and ontology." A.C. Graham, in a programmatic article reprinted in the same series, states: "The concept of Being is a good test for the thesis of Benjamin Whorf that the grammatical structure of language guides the formation of philosophical concepts." Like other writers in this field, Graham seems to envy the good fortune of the Chinese and others whose language prevented them from lapsing into some of the typical mistakes and confusions of Western ontology.

Not only orthodox Heideggerians may feel inclined to associate the linguistic approach to the question of being with what has been called "forgetfulness of being." The very idea of coping with the theme of being by laying bare and making empirically and structurally available its alleged linguistic foundations is in itself a significant historical symptom; and for all its cross-cultural breadth, it remains strangely parochial in its historical setting. This, of course, does not at all imply that it is philosophically irrelevant. We can learn from it; we have to learn from it. To take notice of this approach and its findings, and of the story of success which it has produced, is simply a question of intellectual honesty and alertness.

Rather different possibilities of cross-examining our Western theme of being seem to be suggested by what is called—faute de mieux—"comparative philosophy"—a discipline which still has difficulties in establishing itself as a discipline, and which has not yet produced any "story of success." Its reputation is still rather questionable, and among its more characteristic features is the discrepancy between its pretensions and its actual results. An impatient search for results and achievements, however, may in itself be detrimental to the not yet fully developed spirit of comparative philosophy, which has still to learn to understand better its own possibilities and aspirations. It would certainly be naive and futile to expect any quintessential, all-comprehensive concept of being from a comparison and adjustment of different ways of thinking about, or of dispensing with, what we call 'being.'

Yet the basic stimulus of comparative philosophy, the postulate and actual prospect of a richer and wider context of philosophical and historical understanding and self-awareness, can no longer be put aside in our present situation. What comparative philosophy needs is courage, modesty, and patience: not the accumulation of more and more juxtaposable data, not the rash jumping to general conclusions concerning "essential" differences and "ultimate" identities, but the courage and patience to develop gradually its own hermeneutics, to adjust its means, methods, and expectations to its subject matter, and to grow into its own context of understanding and of being understood.

In reexamining ontological terms and questions in this new and
developing context of comparative philosophy, the following, in particular, would be relevant: the question of being and the philosophical discipline of ontology, as we find them in the Western tradition, are not to be taken as definite achievements, which we simply may or may not find missing or less developed elsewhere. Trying to think about the question of being in a "comparative" context means to think about the questionability of this question, about its dignity or vacuity as a question, about possible roots and horizons of its being asked—as well as of its being passed over in silence—and to be ready to learn from its absences as well as from its more or less explicit presences. Nor would this mean merely relating the question to any linguistic raw materials or similar conditioning factors. Being, after all, is not in such a sense that we might say what it is. How, then, can we define ontology in terms of its subject matter? And are we sure of it as a historical phenomenon? Anybody who is only slightly familiar with the historical dimensions of the theme will be reluctant to accept allegedly up-to-date and quintessential definitions, such as Quine's reduction of the "ontological problem" to the "simplicity" of the "three Anglo-Saxon monosyllables: 'What is there?' Such a definition or delimitation would, in fact, amount to disregarding what, for all its ambiguity and possible vacuity, remains crucial to any radical philosophical questioning about being: that sense of the question, according to which being is not exhausted by whatever there is; according to which it refers to and aims at being in its transcendence of what there is and exposes itself to the ambivalence and possible absurdity of the 'and' in "being and what there is."

The following remarks on some "ontological" perspectives in Indian thought are as preliminary as they are limited. They are not meant to be an exemplary realization of the preceding programmatic considerations. They are, by and large, not explicitly "comparative" and do not go beyond occasional references to Western concepts. Within the Indian tradition, special attention has been paid to developments in the Vaiśeṣika system, which is certainly not the most inspiring school of thought in India. It might, however, provide some materials for counter-illustrating basic issues of Aristotle's ontological approach, and for reconsidering some of our most familiar ontological concepts. In its very failures and distortions it may help us to keep in mind the challenge of the "and" in our title phrase "being and what there is."

The Indian Tradition in General

In general, we may say that the Indian tradition does not disprove our earlier observation that the question of being, as an explicit theme, assigned to a specific philosophical discipline, is a symptomatically Western phenomenon. The tradition of sādvidyā ("knowledge of being") referred
to by J.A.B. van Buitenen remains different from that kind of disciplinary tradition which we call ontology. Yet being (sât) is thematic in the oldest documents of Indian thought, in the Vedic and upaniṣadic texts (van Buitenen takes such thematization of sât as the starting point of Indian “philosophy”), and it remains an important and recurrent topic in later traditions.6

In one of the most glorious passages of Indian thought, Uddālaka Āruṇi teaches his son Śvetaketu:

In the beginning, my dear, this world was just Being (sât), one only, without a second. To be sure, some people say: “In the beginning this world was just Non-being (a-sât), one only, without a second; from that Non-being Being was produced.” But verily, my dear, whence could this be? . . . How from Non-being could Being be produced? On the contrary, my dear, in the beginning this world was just Being, one only, without a second.7

The text itself indicates that it is preceded by earlier discussions and speculations about being and non-being. And the theory of the origination of being from non-being, to which it explicitly refers, is, in fact, found not only in the Upaniṣads, but also in the Brāhmaṇas, and even in the Rgveda itself.8

It would be out of place here to attempt any thorough clarification of the earliest, especially Rgvedic uses of sât and asat, as we find them in the famous hymn X.129, or in X.72.9 W. Norman Brown has proposed a concrete cosmological interpretation, according to which sât would be the realm of men and gods and of the cosmic order (ṛta), and asat the chaotic underworld of the demons.10 This interpretation is, no doubt, a significant signpost; its textual basis seems, however, not quite sufficient for a full and definite justification. At any rate, it is obvious that sât and asat in the Rgveda do not mean ‘being’ versus ‘nothing,’ or ‘existence’ and ‘non-existence’ in any abstract sense.

Discussions of sât and asat in the Brāhmaṇa texts are usually on the level of mythical and ritualistic identifications and personifications. There are very few philosophically significant occurrences, which, like the equation of what is (asti) with what is “immortal” in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (X.4.2.21), may be taken as corresponding to the upaniṣadic connotations of permanence and self-sufficiency, of unity and identity. Being in this sense becomes a familiar characteristic of brahman, and the two terms may even be used as synonyms. The Kaṭha Upaniṣad states that there is nothing else to be said or thought about brahman than the pure is (asti) alone (VI.12–13). In this and similar functions, ‘being’ is not merely, not even primarily, a theoretical and speculative notion. It always designates a soteriological goal; it designates the goal of self-realization: to know being
means to coincide with being, which is always present as one’s own true potential. A famous passage of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, which we may call a prayer, says: “From non-being [asat] lead me to being [sat]; from darkness lead me to light; from death lead me to immortality”; and the text itself goes on to tell us that ‘being’ in this context is the same as ‘light’ and ‘immortality’. Connotations of truth, purity, and goodness quite naturally accompany such understanding of being.

There is no systematically developed terminology of being in the *Upaniṣads*, and the applicability of *sat* to *brahman* and to the absolute in its primeval unity remains often ambiguous and is sometimes explicitly disputed, in accordance with the transontological language of *Ṛgveda* X.1.29 and with the old dispute over the priority of *sat* or *asat* which was mentioned earlier. It is obvious that in these and similar discussions the question of unity takes precedence over the question of being. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (II.3, 1ff.), explaining the “two forms of *brahman,” associates *sat* with that aspect which is “formed,” “mortal,” and “stationary,” and contrasts it with the other aspect of *brahman*, which remains “beyond” (*tyat*). The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* referring to the same terminology of *sat* and *tyat*, presents *sat* and its separation from *tyat* as a result of *brahman’s* self-procreation, and it puts *sat* on the side of the “defined,” “based,” “conscious,” “real.” “As the real [*brahman*] became whatever there is here.” Being in these passages appears as a step into diversity; *brahman* is being insofar as it (or “he”) coincides with the world, with what there is. But there remains the aspect of transcendence, and *sat* alone falls short of the primeval unity of *brahman*.

In view of such passages on the one hand, and the glorification of *sat* in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* on the other, we may say that the upaniṣadic role of *sat* is ambiguous, corresponding to the ambiguity of the relationship between being and what there is. Being is both immanent and transcendent; and such immanence-in-transcendence may have varying facets of identity and difference (a constant theme and stimulus of Indian thought). Being itself is the unity and identity of what there is: in this very function, it may be taken as something over and above the multifarious entities; on the other hand, it may appear as so deeply committed to the actual presence of this world that it cannot also represent its primeval ground and unity. Entities *are*, yet, being alone *is*; being transcends, and it has itself to be transcended. Is there a cleavage in the meaning of ‘to be’? Is there a ‘higher’ and a ‘lower’ meaning?

The systematic tradition of Advaita Vedānta, basing itself upon the *Upaniṣads*, reflects and systematically develops these and similar questions and ambiguities. The notion of being no doubt plays an important part in Advaita; yet it is used with caution and reserve. Śaṅkara’s references to *brahman as sat* or *sanmātra* (“being alone,” “pure being”) remain somewhat
casual; the triad “being, consciousness, bliss” (saccidānanda), a standard formula in later Vedānta, is not found in his authentic writings.\(^{15}\) And the theory of levels of discourse, truth, and reality, which permeates his thought and especially his interpretation of the sacred texts, is not systematically developed in terms of levels of being.\(^{16}\) Śaṅkara and numerous later Advaitins seem to be more interested in refuting false conceptions of being than in establishing their own view of the absolute in terms of being.

There are Vedāntins, however, who go much further than Śaṅkara in thematizing and explicating being and in using it as a vehicle for the understanding of brahman. We hear about a tradition of sattādvaita, which identifies brahman or the non-dual principle of all reality as sattā, “beingness” (a term strictly avoided by Śaṅkara).\(^{17}\) And Maṇḍanamīśra, the great and influential outsider of classical Advaita, devotes special care to reexamining the notion of being and its applicability to brahman. “Pure beingness,” sanmātra, is, e.g., interpreted as the one and all-pervasive content of immediate, non-relational, pre-predicative perception (nirvikalpakapraty-ākṣa); the supreme unity of all reality is thus presented as a given factor of perception, underlying all conceptualizing, particularizing, predicative perception, imagination, and thought. This is at the same time a rejoinder to the Buddhist theory of innumerable discontinuous and disparate “self-characterizers” (svalakṣaṇa) as data of pre-predicative perception, and it is one instance of the far-reaching dialectical relationship between Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism.\(^{18}\) On the doctrinal and terminological surface it is, of course, one of the most striking differences between Buddhism and Advaita that the Buddhists generally reject, avoid, or ridicule any theorizing in terms of being, with its connotations of self-nature, permanence, and self-sufficiency.\(^{19}\)

The Vaiśeṣika School

Much of what Vedāntins and Buddhists, as well as representatives of several other systems, have to say about, against, or even in defiance of being is, in some sense, directly or indirectly related to conceptualizations of being as they are found in the Vaiśeṣika system and its sister-system, Nyāya. However narrow and insufficient these conceptualizations may be, they carry out, in a very instructive manner, certain exemplary conceptual procedures. Within the Indian context, they represent an exemplary target of criticism, and we may say that they play a catalytic role in the development of explicit and systematic thought about being in India.

The Vaiśeṣika system is usually labeled a “doctrine of categories,” “category” being the traditionally accepted translation of the Sanskrit term padārtha. It is, in fact, an attempt to enumerate exhaustively the constituents of our world and to group them in certain highest classes.
In the basic text of the school, the *Vaiśeṣikasūtras* (a text which is somewhat questionable in its present philological status), two terms, *sattā*²⁰ and *bhāva*, are used to advocate an understanding of being as "highest universal" (*paramaṁ sāmānyam*), i.e., the most universal, all-pervasive, common feature, perceivable by all senses, in our world, in its "substances," "qualities," and "motions" (*dravya, guṇa, karman*). It appears likely—there is, indeed, considerable evidence—that at an earlier stage the Vaiśeṣika program of classification did not, at least thematically, go beyond these three "categories" or constituents of reality (*padārtha*). If we accept the testimony of later commentators, especially Vyomaśiva, as valid indication that in the original version of the *Vaiśeṣikasūtras* Kaṇāḍa announced his philosophy as a program of naming, enumerating whatever "has the character of being" (*bhūvarūpa*), we may assume that he was referring to this group of "categories."²¹ We have, of course, insufficient evidence to decide whether being was a really thematic and programmatic concept for Kaṇāḍa himself, or whether he simply took it for granted in its commonsense connotations.

That the concept of being actually assumes some kind of programmatic and thematic function seems unquestionable. It emerges as the horizon, the framework of Kaṇāḍa's program of exhaustive enumeration, of classifying the totality of what there is. We have nonetheless no evidence to believe that he ever raised the question of being as an explicit problem and project, or that he designed his system of "categories" as an explicit answer to such a question. Unlike Aristotle's categories, the *padārthas* of classical Vaiśeṣika are never presented as "meanings of being," and there is no Vaiśeṣika science of "being qua being" to which they might be taken as responding. In the *Vaiśeṣikasūtras*, being becomes thematic and problematic in an obviously secondary, derivative, retrospective manner. It emerges in some kind of summarizing reflection upon what seems to be the original and historically earlier stratum of the Vaiśeṣika doctrine of categories—the comprehensive classification of all particular and manifest entities, i.e., "substances," "qualities," and "motions." They all have in common that they are; being (*sattā, bhāva*) is their common denominator, their one and all-pervasive common feature. Being, in this sense, retrospectively circumscribes the realm of thematization. Gradually, however, it manifests itself as an entity of its own: it appears as "something different" (*arthaṅtara*) from the particular entities in which it is found, and, apart from being the comprehensive nature of the first group and level of "categories," it appears itself as a categorizable entity, an enumerable and juxtaposable world component on the second level of "categories," i.e., "universals," "individualities," "inherence" (*sāmānya, viśeṣa, samavāya*).²² As "highest," all-pervasive universal, it is itself just one among many other entities, both universals and non-universals. In the *Daśapadārthaśāstra*, a
somewhat heretical Vaiśeṣika text of the period around A.D. 500 (?), sattā is, in fact, presented as a separate "category," and not as a mere instance of the category or class of Universals.23

The familiar rendering of Vaiśeṣika sattā (also bhāva) as "existence" should, if retained at all, be taken with caution and reserve. It should by no means suggest any contrast to 'essence.' What we are used to calling 'essence' and 'existence' are never explicitly distinguished in Vaiśeṣika. Further, we have to keep in mind that the notion of sattā is not meant to establish any confrontation between 'being' and 'nothing' (or 'nothingness'); there is no radical notion of nothingness in Vaiśeṣika or any other Indian system. In its main and basic function, sattā is simply the common denominator of what there is; it provides an element of community, a common ground and horizon to what has been thematized by the program of enumerating and classifying all world components. In view of such connotations and non-connotations, beingness, though an awkward expression, might be worth considering as a translation of sattā. In general, such problems of translation should be taken as welcome opportunities to reexamine our own familiar apparatus of ontological terms and concepts, and to ask ourselves whether we really know what we mean by 'essence' and 'existence,' 'being' and 'nothingness,' 'possibility' and 'actuality,' etc., and how binding this framework really is.

Praśastapāda (sixth century), the most important commentator and reorganizer of classical Vaiśeṣika, follows the usage of sattā and bhāva, as we find it in the Vaiśeṣikasūtras. 'Beingness' is the "highest universal," the most common attribute, and as such, it is not basically different from, only more universal than other common attributes, such as 'blueness' (ni-latva). As factors of unity and similarity, as objectively identical correlates of recurrent perception and linguistic repetition, they are on equal terms. In addition, however, Praśastapāda uses a term which symptomatically illustrates his role as reorganizer and definite systematizer of classical Vaiśeṣika: the common abstract attribute 'is-ness' (asitva), which, together with 'knowableness' (jnayatva) and 'nameableness' (abhidheyatva), belongs to all six categories and can therefore be predicated of the universal (sāmānya) 'beingness' itself; to attribute 'beingness in the sense of sattā to sattā or any other universal would, of course, lead to an infinite regress.24

Praśastapāda characterizes the first group of "categories" ("substances," "qualities," "motions") as having sattāsambandha, "connection with beingness," and the second group ("universals," "individualities," "inherence") as having svātmasattva, "beingness, of, or by virtue of, own nature." These terms are found only once in his text, and they are never explicitly defined. Their distinction has, of course, some very obvious commonsense connotations, corresponding to the distinction between the robust reality of causally efficient particulars like cows and horses and the
somewhat less tangible being of their universal features, cowness and
horseness; cows give milk, cowness obviously doesn’t. Such commonsense
connotations cannot, however, describe adequately the systematic function
of the two concepts.

In the secondary literature, there are a few rather incidental attempts
to account for this conceptual structure, but they are far from satisfactory.
Leaving aside the full argumentation and textual evidence, let me briefly
summarize the following relevant points: Astītva, ‘is-ness,’ appearing side
by side with jñeyatva and abhidheyatva, means the applicability of the word
is, i.e., the fact that there is an objective basis and condition of saying ‘it is,’
in the sense of its being identifiable, recognizable, distinguishable from,
not reducible to, other entities, and thereby knowable, speakable, suitable
as truth-condition for thought and speech.

Astītva, ‘is-ness,’ in this sense seems to be quite appropriate for
Prāśastapāda’s second group of categories, i.e., “universals,” etc. They are
what they are, insofar as they are identifiable natures, determinate in
themselves, recognizable in thought and speech. It is much less evident
how it has to be understood if we try to relate it to the first group of world
components, i.e., to the concrete, “manifest” particular entities and
processes which we call “substances,” “qualities,” “motions.” In what
sense is their being an astītva of this sort? In what sense can the ‘beingness,’
which they have in common, be taken as exemplifying that basic connota-
tion of identifiability which we find in astītva, ‘is-ness’?

The sense in which we may expect an answer to these questions from
Prāśastapāda himself has to be qualified; and in order to avoid an entangle-
ment of his conceptual network, we have to keep in mind that there are
two different “ontological dichotomies” in his system, which represent,
moreover, different levels of thematicity. On the one hand, there is—
both basic and somehow in the background—the distinction between
sattā and astītva; on the other hand, there is the subdivision of astītva into
sattāsambandha and svātmasattva. In the context under discussion, sattā-
sambandha, ‘connection with beingness’ (not ‘beingness’ itself), is referred
to and subsumed under astītva. In terms of Prāśastapāda’s conceptual
framework, this is not without significance. ‘Beingness,’ as a real universal,
is one of the real, ontologically separable components of the world; but
sattāsambandha, like astītva itself, is not a real universal, is not a separable,
juxtaposable world component. It is only a common abstract attribute,
a way and aspect of conceptually relating the actual world components, a
product of abstraction, and in no way separable from that the attribute
of which it is. It is, in Prāśastapāda’s terminology, a merely abstract
“homogeneity,” a śādharma. ‘Connection with beingness’ is the basic
condition under which “substances,” “qualities,” “motions” exist; and
this is not the same as the universal ‘beingness’ itself; sattā, as a universal,
is eternal and unchangeable. It is potentially omnipresent and can be actually present in, actually exemplified by things which are. And sattā-
sambandha, strictly speaking, is this actual presence of sattā. It has a much more tangible connotation of temporality than sattā itself, which, according to its Prābhākara Mīmāṁśā critics, represents the prototype of a completely atemporal and static understanding of being; this temporal connotation becomes more explicit in later Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika texts.\(^{25}\)

*Sattāsambandha*, ‘connection with beingness,’ thus indicates the condition under which concrete “manifest” entities are what they are, and have that identifiability, recognizability which is the basic meaning of astitva; understood as abstract “homogeneity” or as “common abstract attribute” of certain entities, it is a being which falls in no way apart from that the being of which it is.

Recapitulating our interpretation of Praśastapāda’s way of dealing with the question of being, we may say there are at least two ways and levels of talking about being. There is being as sattā, the most comprehensive real factor of commonness, which is itself a component of the world. It is hypostasized ‘somethingness’ which has itself become a something, a datum of sense-perception, one factor among others which constitute the world as it is given to us; and there is being as astitva, which merely, and in a sense tautologically, states that whatever is, is (asti), i.e., has a certain character of positivity, identifiability. In accordance with this distinction of levels of discourse, the question what sattā and astitva have in common, and how they function and cooperate in constituting what occurs to us as the actual concrete reality of entities, remains unasked. And in general, Praśastapāda tends methodically to ignore potentially embarrassing questions. Such questions were, of course, not ignored by the numerous opponents of the Vaiśeṣika system.

I cannot enlarge here upon how the Vaiśeṣika commentators after Praśastapāda—especially Vyomaśiva, Śrīdhara, and Udayana—try to explicate and defend, in sometimes rather desperate conceptual efforts, both sattā and astitva, how they try to cope with the manifold questions and objections brought forward by Buddhists, Mīmāṁsakas, and Vedāntins, and specifically with that notorious dilemma which is often referred to as sadasadviṅkalpa, i.e., the question whether that in which ‘beingness’ is said to inhere is or is not by itself.\(^{26}\) I can touch only briefly upon one characteristic episode in this development: the way in which the concept of ‘own nature’ (svarūpa) is brought in as a device of ontological discussion and explication.

The Praśastapāda commentators, particularly Śrīdhara and Udayana, not only paraphrase Praśastapāda’s svātmāsvatvā as svarūpasattā, ‘own-nature-beingness’ (i.e., being which consists in ‘own nature’); they also use the term svarūpa to explain his astitva. Śrīdhara determines: “Whatever is the ‘own nature’ [svarūpa] of an entity [vastu], that is its ‘is-ness’ [astitva],”
and he explicitly substitutes svarūpavattva ("status of something which has its own nature," i.e., its "own nature" itself) for astitva.\(^{27}\) He insists that both astitva and sattā are necessary to account adequately for our world of experience, and he tells us that while we need sattā to explain our awareness of being in its unity and universality, astitva or svarūpavattva is not superfluous either, because 'beingness' could not be present in what is without a characteristic nature (svarūpa) of its own, i.e., in what is not a definite something. It would be utterly wrong to utilize here the Western terminology of essence and existence, as has been attempted, or to refer to the Scholastic idea of an "esse superadditum essentiae": astitva as svarūpavattva is not essence without existence, but being without unity and universality.\(^{28}\)

The word svarūpa, which has thus assumed a central role in ontological explication, is one of those highly evasive, allegedly self-evident quasi-terms which philosophers tend to utilize as loopholes whenever their technical terminology and their thematically developed conceptual framework leads them into difficulties.\(^{29}\) What is obvious is that Śrīdhara wants to elucidate the connotation of identifiability, distinguishability, which we found in Praśastapāda's astitva. At the same time, however, he responds to, and tries to neutralize, the criticism of the Vaiśeṣika ontology as we find it in the Prabhakara school of Mīmāṃsā, especially in the writings of Śālikanāthamisra.\(^{30}\) The Prabhakaras argue that the assumption of a real universal sattā, 'beingness,' is unnecessary, that being, and the reality of our world, has basically to be accounted for in terms of the mere 'own nature' and self-identity of each individual entity (vastusvarūpa), and that the alleged common factor, sattā, is in reality nothing more than an upādhi, a merely accidental and external qualification of what there is. 'Beingness' is reduced to the upādhi "suitability for being connected with a means of correct knowledge" (pramaṇasambandhayogatā), i.e., capability to serve as truth-condition. In this interpretation, an entity (seinendes) is, and it is perfectly real as such and as whatever it may be; its being (Sein), however, is nothing but a common aspect, i.e., its knowability, its suitability for being the truth condition of thought and speech.

In a sense the question of being is simply silenced by reverting to the mere fact, somewhat commonsensically accepted, that things are, and are what they are, as long as they are. However, Śālikanātha gives at least a few hints concerning the context and rationale of his usage of svarūpa: "Svarūpa as such" (svarūpamātrā) is the being of each entity in its irreducible, non-relational selfhood and self-identity; it is being without regard to other being or to non-being (ekākāt bhāvah); and such being as self-identity is claimed as the datum of immediate, non-relational, pre-predicative perception (nirvikalpakapratyakṣa).\(^{31}\) This is obviously a reaction to Buddhist challenges of the notions of 'self-being' and 'own nature' (svabhāva; svarūpa), as we find them in the doctrines (or anti-doctrines) of "devoidness"
(śūnyatā) and “negative determination” (apoha), and it is a reenactment of an old and traditional association of ‘being’ and ‘own nature.’ At the same time, however, it is a reaction to the ontological trend of classical Vaiśeṣika, according to which ‘beingness’ (sattā) appears as some kind of extra, as something added to the ‘own nature’ of each entity. In its Prābhākara Mīmāṁśā interpretation, being simply coincides with what there is, instead of being presented as a somehow separable factor or component.

What is remarkable about the counter-reaction of such Vaiśeṣika commentators as Śrīdhara is the degree to which they adopt the concept of svārūpa, not only in its application to the second group of “categories” but also in accepting svārūpa as the underlying condition of sattā (which is thus relegated to a secondary and potentially obsolete position), and in using it to describe the basic orientation, the horizon of their understanding of being. However, as the subsequent development shows, this concept is so functional and empty in itself that it is quite inappropriate to vindicate the robust naturalism of ancient Vaiśeṣika and to maintain its realistic conception of being against reductionist and relativistic challenges. Udayana, who even as a Vaiśeṣika commentator leans toward the more epistemologically oriented tradition of Nyāya and its basic notion of tattva, truth-conditioning ‘thatness’ which covers both negative and positive facts, already uses the concept of svārūpa not as a device for explicating positive being, but in a sense which comprises both ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ (bhāva and abhāva). Yet svārūpa is still meant to include ‘non-being’ only in the sense of a mere absence of positive entities, thus demarcating it from what will never be actual and real and always remain mere fiction (tuccha, alīka). It is, of course, very easy for opponents such as the Vedāntic dialectician Śrīharṣa to point out that svārūpa is inappropriate for drawing this borderline. In its basic connotation of identifiability and distinguishability, it is applicable to the world of mere fictions, too; it is no problem to distinguish a hare’s horn from a sky-flower.

We noticed earlier that being (as sattā) seems to become thematic in the Vaiśeṣikasūtras in some kind of retrospective manner, in a summarizing reflection upon what has been classified as “substances,” “qualities,” “motions.” Subsequently, this ‘beingness,’ as one of the universals, becomes itself a quasi-entity, and another concept of being, astitva, is introduced to cover the extended field of thematized, hypostasized objects. Astitva, however, merely reaffirms whatever may have been objectified (and may thus include what had been abhāva, ‘non-being,’ on another level of objectivication). A concept of being which in such a manner follows the extending horizons of thematization and objectification lends itself to what we may call “semantic evaporation,” until it may, in fact, appear as the “last cloudy streak of evaporating reality.”
Conclusion

There is, in accordance with my introductory remarks, no explicit question of being and nothing like the Aristotelian project of a science of "being qua being" in Vaiśeṣika; and, of course, the Indian philosophical tradition, at least in classical times, does not favor formulating questions as questions, i.e., as open frameworks for future efforts of thought. There is a much more emphatic sense of thematicity in Aristotle's way of dealing with being. It is richer in suggestive ambiguities and its systematic role is much more central. Important areas of Aristotle's philosophy, such as the doctrine of categories, are explicit responses to the question of being. The categories are themselves understood as "meanings of being"; the Vaiśeṣika padārthas are not. Being, according to Aristotle, can never be relegated to the role of sumnum genus; in fact, the idea of a sumnum genus as such is rejected.36

Aristotle's thought about being is followed by that tradition which in later centuries was called 'ontology.' The Vaiśeṣika conceptualizations of being did not initiate any such tradition of ontology, and they may appear as a mere dead-end road. Yet they remain an honest and respectable attempt in one particular direction, and their very one-sidedness may serve as a catalyst of clarification, and as a basis and vehicle for a more radical questioning. In fact, in the classical Indian tradition, Vaiśeṣika thought about being has served these functions; it has been an exemplary target of criticism, and as such, it may still be instructive today.

Notes

1. Metaphysics, 1028b2f; 1003a21ff.; W.D. Ross translates: "science which investigates that which is, as being, and the attributes that belong to it in virtue of its own nature" (Aristotle's Metaphysics. A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary, rpt. [London: Oxford University Press, 1966], vol. 1, p. 251).
3. Verhaar is editor of the series The Verb 'Be' and its Synonyms, Dordrecht-Holland, 1967--; published within the Supplementary Series of Foundations of Language. The statement quoted from the Editorial Preface is repeated in all volumes so far published.
8. Cf. Chāndogya Up. III.19,1; Taิตṭīrīya Up. II.7,1; Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up. I.2,1; Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa VI.1,1,1; Rgveda X.72,2–3.
9. Especially X.129,1 (nāsad aśīn no sad āśī) and 4 (sato bandhum asati niravindan); cf. I.164,46 (ekam sad vipra bahudhā vadante).
12. I.3,28 (asato mā sad gamaya, tamaso mā jyotir gamaya, mṛtyor māṁstam gamaya); cf. Rgveda X.129,2: na mṛtyur asid amṛtam na . . .
13. Derivatives like satya and sattva would, of course, also be relevant in this context; cf., e.g., Taṅtīrīya Up. II.1,1: satyaṁ jñānam anantam brahma.
16. The distinction of two levels of discourse (cf. Muṇḍaka Up. I.1,4, dw vidye) is used by Śaṅkara as a basis for reconciling the apparently conflicting upanisadic statements about the origin from sat or asat; cf., e.g., Bhāṣya on Brahmaśūtra II.1,17.
20. Major parts of my following remarks on classical Vaiśeṣika are a summary or a more philosophically oriented adaptation of my article “Conceptualizations of ‘Being’ in Classical Vaiśeṣika,” Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens 19, 1975. This article gives fuller textual evidence for many of the following statements.
21. See n. 20; cf. especially the fact that Sūtra I.1,4 is of very questionable authenticity.
22. Vaiśeṣikasūtra I.2,8.
26. See the article referred to in n. 20.

29. The word can be used in a wide variety of contexts and disciplines, with more or less technical or common sense connotations; on the svam rūpam reference in Sanskrit grammar, as ‘autonomous’ use of a word, cf. J. Brough, *Theories of General Linguistics in the Sanskrit Grammarians*, ed. J.F. Staal (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1972), pp. 402ff.


32. Cf. *Nyāyasūtra* 4.1.38 (na, svabhāvasiddher bhāvānām) and Bhāṣya (... svata dharmaṇa bhāvā bhavanti ...); an investigation of the role of svā in Hindu-Buddhist controversies would, no doubt, be worthwhile).


36. Consequently, B.K. Matilal’s statement that sattā, as “highest sāmānya,” is “comparable with the notion of highest genus in the Aristotelian system” (*The Nāya-Nyāya Doctrine of Negation* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968], p. 123) is quite unacceptable in terms of Aristotelian thought.

Bibliography

All specific references are given in the notes. For background information, see: