

**Critically evaluate Hölderlin's claim that 'Being expresses the joining of Subject and Object'.**

**by Chris Bailey**

The principle of sufficient reason seems to set up an infinite series in which each conclusion has to be conditioned by a previous one. To avoid this situation philosophy must try to find an unconditioned truth that it can begin from. Hölderlin's claim that Being is the initial unconditioned truth was actually meant to show the impossibility of such a beginning for philosophy. However, it eventually turned out to be an important development in the history of philosophy.

Hölderlin's position was primarily aimed at Fichte, but in fact it challenged the entire Cartesian tradition of beginning from the knowing subject as a supposedly presuppositionless starting point for philosophy. Hölderlin showed that such a position inevitably led to a dualism between subject and object. Such dualism had been obvious in the case of Descartes and Kant, but Fichte thought he had succeeded in overcoming this dualism.

Fichte believed the 'I' could be an unconditioned starting point for philosophy because it knew itself directly through what he called 'intellectual intuition'. Because this intuition gave truth through direct unmediated experience alone it did not involve the use of judgement and concepts and could not be derived or demonstrated by reason. Because it is the 'I' knowing itself directly, Fichte believed that this self-knowing 'I' represented an initial identity between subject and object from which the 'not-I' was then derived as object for the 'I'.

Hölderlin showed that Fichte's starting point could not represent an identity between subject and object as he claimed. Beginning from the knowing 'I' inevitably involved a separation between subject and object even when the 'I' itself was its own object. Hölderlin insisted that the identity of subject and object only existed at the level of Being itself and that Being preceded consciousness.

Hölderlin retained the idea of intellectual intuition in justifying Being as the unconditioned. He insisted that we did not know Being through reason - it was something we were immediately and directly aware of as a unity between ourselves and nature before we began to reason about it.

Although they both began with intellectual intuition to provide knowledge of an unconditioned beginning there was a major difference between Hölderlin and Fichte concerning the development of knowledge beyond the unconditioned. Fichte had seen the 'I' as a first principle from which philosophy could begin. He regarded it as a starting point for building an entire philosophical system.

For Hölderlin however the unconditioned, Being, could not be a first principle for philosophy at all. On the contrary it showed that philosophy could never know the true nature of the universe. Being, which Hölderlin equated with the entire universe, the 'Absolute', everything that 'is', preceded consciousness and could not be the object of consciousness. Reason (Judgement) was seen as inevitably dividing this Absolute that Being represented into subject and object and "no separation can take place without injuring the nature of that which is to be divided". The unity of subject and object that Being expressed could only be seen as a presupposition, a transcendent ground, for reflection and consciousness and could not itself be consciously thought.

But if Being could only be known through an initial intellectual intuition and reason could take this knowledge no further, then this Being really amounted to Nothing. As Novalis, who agreed with Hölderlin against Fichte, pointed out: "One knows nothing of a thing if one knows only that it is." (§454. Page 145)

The way Hölderlin and the early German Romantics attempted to get around this was by extending the idea of intellectual intuition to be much wider than just knowing that Being simply was the unity of subject and object into including some knowledge of the nature of that unity. In particular, they insisted on something they called aesthetic intuition as a special form of intellectual intuition that was exhibited in artistic, particularly poetic, expression. Since art took the form of imagery

rather than being a form of conceptual thought they believed that it could evince a knowledge of the Absolute without the problems they saw as being involved with reason.

By its very definition it must be impossible to give a rational account of intellectual intuition. It has to remain a mystery. Perhaps if everyone was able to acknowledge that they possessed this intuition then its existence might be accepted. But, although this might arguably be true concerning the initial intuition of Being, it certainly is not the case with the wider claims of aesthetic intuition. It would seem to be limited to individual poets and artists. The only possible conclusion would seem to be that they have a mystical form of knowledge of the Absolute that the rest of us do not possess.

The error of Hölderlin that leads ultimately to mysticism lies in his initial premise. As Hegel would later point out, Being, the Absolute, cannot just consist of subject-object identity, but has to be seen as the identity of subject-object identity and subject-object non-identity. Hölderlin has in fact himself divided Being when he separates it from "Judgement". The concepts of judgement 'are'. They cannot be outside of Being. The early German Romantics themselves divided the Absolute into two; a world of appearance and a world of reality lying beyond and apart from this. The appearance must itself be part of reality. It is the appearance of the infinite Absolute expressed in finite human thought, reason. Though it may proceed continually through error and approximation reason is not by its very nature blocked from knowing the Absolute.

Unwittingly, Hölderlin, despite believing he was showing the impossibility of philosophical knowledge, actually founded a new philosophical school, German objective idealism. He gave Being an independent, Platonic, existence by equating it with the universe. It was no longer just a subjective, purely mental idea. Despite his insistence that starting with the Absolute as Being could not be the foundation for a philosophical system, that is precisely what it did become for Hegel.

#### **References:**

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