
THE PROBLEM APPROACH IN HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES OF THE CATEGORY 'NON-EXISTENCE'

**Aleksey Vladimirovich Bogomolov^{*}, Anastasia Valentinovna Babaeva
and Dmitry Valeryevich Vorobiev**

*Minin Nizhny Novgorod State Pedagogical University (Minin University), Ulyanova Str. 1,
Nizhniy Novgorod, 603005, Russian Federation*

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Abstract

The main concern of the paper is one of the classical problems of Philosophy and Christian theology – the problem of non-existence and the problem of creation from nothing. These questions are central to the entire discipline. This paper tries to indicate the methodological issues of historical and philosophical study of these research problems. The issue of non-existence has been a controversial and much disputed subject within the field of the History of philosophy. Interestingly, it is often assumed in classical works on the History of philosophy that the category of 'nonbeing' and the problem of 'non-existence' are often synonymous. This paper contests this claim. There is increasing evidence that the problematic nature of non-existence in philosophical concepts has not been studied enough. Obviously, the application to non-existence in the concepts of thinkers and the problem of non-existence in the same concepts is not the same thing. The article targets the identification of a methodological foundation that will allow us to separate the references to non-existence in the concepts of philosophers from the actual problem of non-existence. Proceeding from this assumption, we propose to apply the problem approach to historical and philosophical studies. The article considers the main principles of applying the problem approach to the category of 'non-existence' and shows how to use the problem approach in a specific historical and philosophical study. As an example, the authors refer to the philosophy of Parmenides and substantiate the position according to which in his ontology the problem of non-existence plays a pivotal role.

Keywords: antiquity, creation, nothing, problem, doctrine

1. Introduction

There is much evidence that 'non-existence' is a fundamental category of Philosophy, and the dialectic of being and nonbeing is an important element in the ontological constructions of many Western European philosophical and theological systems.

^{*}E-mail: a.v.bogomolov@list.ru

The problem of non-existence and the problematic field of nothing occupies a special place in Christian theology. This feature emerges from the idea of creation from nothingness (the key Christian doctrine), i.e. nothing exists only in the form of an intellectual construction that does not have any counterpart equivalents, any objects of its own application. This fundamental principal leads us to the idea that there is no region (animate or inanimate) where everything that was created today could be located before its creation. The concept outlines the fact that every creature before being created does not exist anywhere and in any form. It follows from this that ‘nothing’ as a construction denies the existence of pre-reality, which was the source of all created things.

Classical philosophy discussed mainly the category of ‘existence’ while ‘non-existence’ was as if ‘under a ban’. Much uncertainty still exists about the meaning of ‘non-existence’, which most philosophers describe as something that does not exist; therefore, it seems almost an absurd idea to discuss it. This controversial ‘paradigm’ in the understanding of non-existence within the framework of classical philosophy derives its origin from the well-known proposition of Parmenides, “The only routes of enquiry there are to think of: one, that it is and that it is not possible for it not to be ..; the other, that it is not and that it must not be — this I say to you is a path wholly unknowable” (Frag. B 2.2-6, quoted by Proclus, Commentary on the Timaeus I, 345) [1]. Alternatively, there is a growing body of literature which recognizes the possibility of rethinking the meaning of the category of ‘non-existence’ within the framework of classical philosophy. This is exemplified from a well-known question formulated by G. Leibniz, “Why is there anything at all rather than nothing whatsoever?” [2]. However, it was only in the 20th century when renowned philosophers paid serious attention to this issue. This is evident in the case of M. Heidegger’s well-known question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” [3]. Earlier W. James admitted that this question was the darkest in whole History of philosophy [4]. In other words, the category of ‘non-existence’ comes out of the shadow of life and opens new meanings of philosophical problems, and, most interestingly, the very nothingness becomes a problem.

The study of the notion of non-existence in the preceding tradition is one of the important components in the study of this category. There is much evidence that philosophers of different epochs have shown much interest in the problem of non-existence. This is obvious from the works of Christian thinkers who tried to solve the problem of creation from nothing. This problem is central to the entire doctrine of Christian theology. But neither the essence of this problem of Christian theology, nor the logic of its resolving are possible without resorting to the legacy of antiquity.

This paper attempts to show the methodological aspect of the problem of non-existence in the History of philosophy, on the one hand. On the other hand, the article traces the development of the problem under analysis from the history of ancient Greek philosophy. Turning to the methodology of the study of non-existence in the philosophical sciences, mainly in the history of philosophy, we

bear in mind the following peculiar aspect. The fact is that often the category of 'non-existence' is given as a synonym to the problem of the same name and the necessity of their differentiation for many researchers is not obvious. Simultaneously, there is much evidence that the meanings of the expressions 'the category of non-existence' and 'the problem of non-existence' are different. Consequently, the need for the demarcation of non-existence as a category and non-existence as a problem is obvious. This paper explores the grounds for this demarcation. The second task is to provide examples of historical and philosophical descriptions, proceeding from the distinction between the category of 'non-existence' and the problem of 'non-existence'. The distinction is exemplified in the ontology of Parmenides which serves as a prime example for the research. This choice stems from the idea that, according to experts, the problem of non-existence emerges in the philosophy of Parmenides for the first time in the history of Western European philosophy.

2. Methods

Different authors have described non-existence with the help of different techniques. To allow a deeper insight into the methodological foundation that will allow us to distinguish between the category of 'non-existence' and the problem of 'non-existence' we utilized the problem approach. The advantage of this method is the idea that the authors must clarify the principles of its application, proceeding from their understanding of the problem under discussion. In other words, much of the article centres around the methodology of historical and philosophical research. To capture the complexities of the phenomenon we apply the problem approach which determines necessary factors. To obtain further in-depth information we used logical methods, i.e., deduction, analysis, synthesis, etc. This study assumes an appeal to the historical and philosophical material. Therefore, firstly, of much importance is the method of textual analysis. Secondly, the interpretation and reconstruction of the meanings given in the fragments and texts to which the authors referred, presupposes the use of the hermeneutic method. A complex of methods allowed us to gain a detailed understanding of the phenomenon under discussion.

3. The problem approach to the category of non-existence in the ontology of Parmenides

The first set of questions is aimed to identify the methodological basis, with the help of which we can outline the difference between the 'category of non-existence' and 'the problem of non-existence'. What stands out is the controversy, according to which the 'category of non-existence' is synonymous with the expression the 'problem of non-existence'. Our major finding here is the necessity to justify the idea that 'non-existence' is not simply one of the categories of Philosophy, but also a certain problem. In other words, it is necessary to investigate the category of 'non-existence' based on the principles

of the problem approach. To do this, you need to determine the concept of a problem. Among the many definitions of the concept of the problem, we dwell on the one which is as follows: a problem may be defined as a question or a group of questions relating to a specific subject and not having an unambiguous solution. Therefore, to speak of non-existence as a problem, it is necessary to identify a question or questions regarding cognition, which in this case is non-existence. Further, since we are concerned with a research in the History of philosophy, then, of course, it is necessary to describe specific personalities. And, therefore, we must bear in mind that the list of issues that form the problem of non-existence in the concepts of thinkers can differ. In addition, it is necessary to emphasize that the presence of a problem, in any case, probably, presupposes some solution of it. Here we point out the fact that we highlight the possible existence of solutions to the issues that form the problem, because it is obvious that we have the right to speak about the problem even if the issues identified by it do not have a solution in this concept. Therefore, when using the problem approach in studying the notion of non-existence, one should pay attention to the solutions of the problem of non-existence, if any, in the analysed texts. If during historical and philosophical analysis a researcher cannot find the solution, then he should put on record its absence.

From what has been said, it follows that the problem approach to the category 'non-existence' within the framework of historical and philosophical research has some structure. Firstly, it is obvious that the application of the problem approach is possible only when the category of 'non-existence' occurs in the text. Secondly, as mentioned above, the problem is a question or a set of questions relating to one subject and not having an unambiguous solution. Consequently, the next element is the question or questions relating to non-existence within a specific concept. As an example, the question may be whether there is a question of non-existence, say, in the philosophy of Aristotle. Thirdly, it is important to keep in mind possible answers to the questions that form the problem of non-existence. And finally, fourthly, regarding the problem of non-existence or the problem of non-existence in conjunction with its solution, we propose to classify it as a 'doctrine of non-existence' of one or another philosopher.

Now it is necessary to show how to directly apply the problem approach within the framework of historical and philosophical research. As an example, we turn to the history of ancient Greek philosophy. At least two points indicate the importance of the historical-philosophical analysis of the notion of non-existence in ancient Greek philosophy. Firstly, it was the Greeks who formed this concept for European philosophy and proposed some variants of its definition. Secondly, is that the ancient Greek thinkers determined the problem nature of non-existence. One of our major findings is the fact that in the teachings of some philosophers of that era, non-existence was not only a concept, but also a problem. Another important finding is the idea that a problematic approach to the study of the category of non-existence in the history of ancient Greek thought is practically not applied now. Here, however, we note

that in modern historical and philosophical studies, M.N. Volf and I.V. Berestov [5] effectively utilized the problem approach to Greek philosophy. M.N. Volf rightly notes, "one must distinguish between the problems formulated by the researcher or interpreter of ancient philosophy and the problems posed and solved by Greek philosophers" [6]. The final remark is especially important for our study. And when using the problem approach in this situation, we once again pay special attention to the solutions of the problem of non-existence, if any of them will be presented in the analysed doctrines. We also emphasize that these authors do not apply the problem approach to the category of 'non-existence'.

Obviously, within the framework of one article it is impossible to analyse the views of all ancient Greek philosophers who to some extent affected the category of 'non-existence'. Therefore, now it is necessary to determine which thinkers' concepts will be at the centre of our attention.

We refer to the ontology of Parmenides. In historical and philosophical literature, there is a well-grounded opinion that "existence as a concept was introduced in Philosophy by Parmenides, and although the character of the term was acquired much later ... the concept of existence emerged in the poem by Parmenides, evidently" [7]. We believe Parmenides also introduced in Philosophy the concept of 'nothingness'. Moreover, we assume that Parmenides, for the first time in the history of Western philosophy, posed the problem of non-existence. Thus, it is necessary to prove the proposition according to which the ontology of Parmenides includes the problem of non-existence. Accordingly, it becomes necessary to identify the key issues that form the problem. Since, as we believe, Parmenides not only posed the problem of non-existence, but also proposed its solution, it is necessary to fully explain the reasoning of the decision.

It is almost certain that the maintenance of a problem in Philosophy requires a sufficient justification. It has commonly been assumed that Parmenides refers to non-existence in the text of his poem; this assumption does not need a justification at all. However, according to the many in the field, we cannot firmly affirm the address to the problem of non-existence by the philosopher. Even a superficial reading of 'On Nature' is enough to understand that the notion of non-existence emerges in Parmenides's work as a nonbeing notion. But the assertion that something does not exist does not always mean that there are no problems with this something. On the contrary, provided there is an assumption that a certain position has been formulated regarding something, it is possible to discuss the possibility of interpreting this something as a problem in the teachings of this or that philosopher. Moreover, this reasoning holds ground, even if a philosopher himself does not accept the presence of this problem as evident.

The section above described the condition of probability to discuss non-existence as a problem, investigated by a philosopher, in case it was possible to identify the question or questions concerning non-existence in his research heritage. The explication of these questions in the philosophy of Parmenides must begin with the analysis of the fragments B2, 3 and 5, where he introduced

the so-called ‘two routes of inquiry’. In fragment B2, the philosopher proposes two possible ways to consider the idea. According to one of them, there is only being, and non-existence never can be. On the contrary, the second way denies the existence of being and affirms the existence of nonbeing [1, p. 231]. A likely explanation is that these oppositions serve as an excuse to suppose that Parmenides is asking about the existence of nonbeing. In fact, if it is necessary to recognize either being or non-existence, then, obviously, the question of being of non-existence cannot be ignored. And here it does not matter what kind of answer the ancient philosopher offers us. Therefore, proceeding from the definition that a problem is a question or a set of questions relating to one subject, it is assumed that there is a problem of non-existence in the ontology of Parmenides. Thus, the analysis of fragments B2, 3 and 5 suggests that they conceal the question of whether there is non-existence. The very nonexistence (‘μὴ εἶναι’) is thought of by the philosopher as something contrary to the existing or, following the terminology of Parmenides, to that which is. The question of existence of non-existence in a similar formulation again emerges in fragment B8 (15 and 16), “The solution is as follows: // Is it or is not it?” [8]. The question of whether there is non-existence makes it possible to speak of the existence of a problem of non-existence in the philosophy of Parmenides.

The answer to the question about the ontological status of non-existence is obvious: it does not exist. At the same time, this provision is proved in the poem. On the one hand, Parmenides affirms the identity of being and thinking, while addressing the specificity of words that he uses to express the opposite of being as such. Since each of these words contains in itself an indication of non-existence, Parmenides concludes that non-existence is unthinkable, and, therefore, it does not exist. But, on the other hand, the philosopher endows ‘being’ with a series of features, in each of which there is an intention to deprive non-existence of its ontological status. According to Parmenides, being must be ‘unborn’, ‘not dying’, ‘only-begotten’, ‘unhampered’ and ‘never-ending’. The statement about the unbegottenness of being, likely, informs us only that being has no temporal beginning. However, later in the poem, this situation unfolds itself in such a way that in giving life this characteristic feature easily stimulates the desire to substantiate the provision about the nonbeing of non-existence. It is probable that Parmenides is talking about whether the existence of a pre-reality, which was the source of existence, is possible. It is obvious, that if there was a certain extraterrestrial reality, then it would not necessarily be the very existence. Since Parmenides speaks only of being and non-existence, it can be assumed that the philosopher assumes no other object than non-existence. Since in this case we are talking about the existence of non-existence as a pre-reality, the main ontological proof of the nonbeing of non-existence here is the postulation of the detachment of being from originating (unbegottenness). Consequently, this sign of being can be considered formulated with the need to justify the solution of the problem of non-existence, according to which nonbeing does not exist. In other words, this point of Parmenides’ ontology has as its basis the very principle of deontologization of non-existence.

According to Parmenides, what is to be recognized is not only not born, but also not dying (ἀνόλεθρόν). Birth means death, and if existence arose, it could also perish. With the death of being, something could remain, which is not being itself. And this something could be non-existent. But existence is not subjected to death. Therefore, this sign of being corresponds to the principle of deontologization of non-existence.

The three following signs of being are totality, quiescence, and endlessness. In our opinion, all these signs also reflect the principle of deontologization of non-existence, and, therefore, with their help the solution to the problem of non-existence finds its justification in the ontology of Parmenides. The first of them is the totality. This feature tells us, that being is indivisible, i.e. does not consist of many parts. It is continuous and does not have any gaps within itself. Consisting of many parts, existence would imply the presence of some distance between these parts. Therefore, the endowment of being with such a predicate as 'totality' means that nonbeing does not exist as the distance between different parts of existence. Quiescence is traditionally treated as immobility. The possibility of motion is determined, in part, by the presence of empty space. In the context of the ontology of Parmenides, this means that if existence is moving, then something would exist that is not being. Since, according to Parmenides, either existence or non-nonexistence is possible, then this something must necessarily be non-existent. Consequently, 'quiescence' also includes the principle of deontologization of non-existence. And finally, 'endlessness'. An aspect which emerges as infinity refers only to spatial infinity. Therefore, 'endlessness' makes impossible the existence of non-existence in space, i.e., in the capacity of actual reality.

4. Discussion

The study made it possible to identify the methodological basis, based on which, we can formulate a distinction between 'the category of non-existence' and 'the problem of non-existence' within the framework of historical and philosophical research. As previously stated, the authors propose the application of the problem approach, which makes it possible not only to distinguish 'the category of non-existence' and 'the problem of non-existence', but also to systematize philosophers' views on non-existence. In other words, we believe that the application of the problem approach to 'the category of non-existence' gives the study of the History of philosophy a more systematic character. Thus, the article clarifies the meaning of the following categories of historical and philosophical research: 'the problem of non-existence', 'the category of nothingness', 'the solution of the problem of non-existence'. Our major discovery is the introduction of the concept of 'the doctrine of nonbeing'. The doctrine of non-being is the very problem of non-existence, and its solution.

The application of the problem method to the category of 'non-existence' within the framework of historical and philosophical research is exemplified in authors' attention to the philosophy of Parmenides. One interesting finding is

that in the philosophy of Parmenides the problem of non-existence is present and receives much attention. There is an increasing evidence that the philosopher outlines the rule, according to which existence seeks recognition as either being or nonbeing. It was found that Parmenides, while asserting the existence of being, seeks to justify why, in fact, non-existence is to be recognized as not existing. The fact is that the philosopher tries to prove the position about the nonbeing of non-existence and allows us to talk about the presence of this problem in his teaching, the problem that needs to be solved. In analysing the evidence base of this thesis, experts predominantly focus their attention on those propositions of the ontology of the philosopher, which affirm the impossibility of thought and the word about non-existence. However, the present study has shown that Parmenides has at least one more point of this proof. Defining being as an unconditionally existing reality, the philosopher provides being with such characteristics, the totality of which excludes the possibility to confirm the being of non-existence. This allows us to assume that the ontology of the eleatic is based, in part, on the philosopher's notions of non-being.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study have several important implications for future practice. The paper has identified that in historical and philosophical studies addressed to non-existence there is one inaccuracy, i.e. researchers often equal non-existence with the problem of nonbeing. Simultaneously, of much importance is the fact that the problematic nature of non-existence in the philosophical concept and the reference to non-existence within the framework of the same concept are not the same at all. The investigation of Parmenides has shown that researchers need to justify the fact that non-existence is a problem in the philosophy of this or that thinker. The most important finding to emerge from this article is our attempt to show that it is possible to defuse the tension of this methodological inaccuracy by applying the problem approach. This methodological solution involves extracting issues related to the category of 'non-existence' from an analysed text. This study has found that generally while discussing the problem of non-existence, it can be assumed that the issues existing within the framework of this problem, probably, have and often have solutions. The doctrine of non-being, as noted above, is both the problem of non-being, and its solution. The contribution of this study was to show the application of the problem approach in historical and philosophical research referring to the philosophy of Parmenides. The study provides a new understanding of the philosophical heritage of the philosopher. His poem describes exactly the problem of non-existence, as well as its solutions. The insights gained from this study may be of assistance to a deeper vision that in his philosophy Parmenides offers a doctrine of nonbeing.

The methodology of the present study lays the groundwork for analysing the teachings of both antique philosophers and thinkers who turned their attention to nonbeing at later stages of the development of Philosophy. A greater

focus of application of this methodology can contribute to the study of the key problem of Christian theology, i.e. the problem of creation from nothingness. Parmenides fundamentally denies the existence of non-existence as a pre-reality, which is often viewed as the source of all that exists. At the same time, he allows us to conclude that non-existence is the domain of all that exists before the creation. Contrary to Christian theology, nothing is not the area from which everything happens or, better to say, is extracted and formalized by God the Creator. Contrariwise, nothing as a construction, speaks of the absence of such an area. Parmenides denies the existence of a certain area as a pre-reality, where every being is present even before it comes to being. Nothing, as a construction, tells us that all the created things before their creation do not exist anywhere and in any form.

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