II

The verb 'to be' in Greek philosophy: some remarks

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I   Introduction

Those who read Greek philosophy soon learn that the concept of being, and the verb 'to be', play a central part in the thought of many thinkers. Parmenides (on whom more below) inaugurated metaphysics by his insistence on a choice between two ways of enquiry, 'it is' and 'it is not', and by the momentous consequences he drew concerning the nature of being. Protagoras, according to Plato, *Theaetetus* 152a, propounded the thesis that man is the measure of all things, of things that are, that they are, of things that are not, that they are not. Plato characterised his Forms or Ideas, the objects of knowledge and of philosophic enquiry, as 'the being that really is' (*Phaedrus* 247c7), and as 'the being which has the denomination of "what is"' (*Phaedo* 93d8–9). He drew a famous contrast (discussed below in section III) between the Form which *is purely and fully*, and the many sensibles which *are and are not*. Aristotle chose the terms 'being' (*ousia*) and 'what it is' (*ho esti*) as designations for his key concept, substance; his theory of categories is founded on the claim that 'is' and 'being' vary in sense with the different categories (for example *Metaphysics* 1017a20–4, 1028a10–13); and he propounded a famous definition of truth as 'saying that what is is and that what is not is not' (*Met.* 1011b27).

As we read these statements we must ask ourselves how to understand the key terms involved, whether nouns such as *ousia*, participial phrases such as *to on* ('that which is') or *to ontōs on* ('that which really is'), or various other forms of the Greek verb *einai* from which these are derived. Both when the writer is self-conscious in his employment of a key term (as when Aristotle draws attention to different uses or meanings of 'is') and when the term plays a central but unquestioned role (as in Parmenides), the reader trying to understand the text will be aware of a variety of possible interpretations, and is likely to invoke the aid of distinctions current in contemporary philosophy in the task of interpretation. Many interpreters preface their discussions with a list of different senses or uses of 'is', a list

which is the legacy of much philosophical analysis. And since, for the first two-thirds of this century, the influence of Frege and Russell, and of their formal logic, in particular the apparatus of first-order predicate calculus, held sway over interpreters of ancient philosophy, I start with a discussion of their legacy.

It is, or used to be, an accepted commonplace that the English verb 'to be', along with most of its Indo-European counterparts and in particular with *einai* in ancient Greek, has a number of distinct uses. As Charles Kahn reminded readers in his well-known essay 'The Greek Verb "to be"' and the Concept of Being', John Stuart Mill complained of the fog which arose from overlooking the double meaning of the word 'to be' (when it signifies *to exist*, and when it signifies to *be* a man ... to *be* seen ... to *be* a non-entity), 'a fog which diffused itself at an early period over the whole surface of metaphysics' (Kahn [28], 247, quoting Mill's *Logic* I.iv.i). Kahn refers to Mill's distinction (between the 'is' which means 'exists' and the 'is' of 'is...') as the 'traditional dichotomy'; he points out that it conflates two different distinctions, one syntactic, the other semantic. The syntactic (or grammatical) distinction is between uses of 'be' which are absolute (or complete), as in Hamlet's question 'To be or not to be?', and those which are predicative (or incomplete), where 'is' is followed by a predicate or by some other completion (for example 'is a man', 'is seen', 'is in heaven'). In Kahn's view, applications of this dichotomy to ancient Greek have been flawed, because of this conflation. Kahn accepts that some uses of *esti* ('is') are complete, some incomplete (the syntactic point), but insists that a complete or absolute use of *esti* does not always mean 'exist', but can also mean 'is true', 'is the case' or 'is real'. Further, the incomplete or predicative uses of *esti* can have a variety of nuances, such as durative ('is' meaning 'endures in time'), or locative-existential ('is' meaning 'is spatially located'), so that they may go beyond the mere copula in meaning. (The copula, in traditional theory, is the verb whose sole function is to join subject to predicate and which has no 'further meaning of its own'.)

Thus Kahn identifies two assumptions involved in the 'traditional dichotomy': it assumes first that all absolute uses of 'is' bear the meaning 'exists' and secondly that predicative uses lack meaning and serve merely to join subject to predicate. He insists that both these assumptions are false of ancient Greek *esti*, and that questions of syntactically different uses should be kept apart from issues about meaning.[1]

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[1] Like all who work on the verb 'to be' in Greek philosophy I am deeply indebted to the many writings of Charles Kahn. Kahn [153] lists his publications on the topic, and he reviews them in the opening article of [30]. This collection assembles articles which, in different ways, question the applicability of modern distinctions in the verb 'to be' to ancient Greek philosophical thought.

Kahn's writings on the use of *esti* in Greek philosophy are of great importance, and in this paper I try to explore some key passages which rely on the verb 'to be' with the help of his observations. Indeed, I press Kahn's doubts further, questioning what he did not dispute, the syntactic distinction: that is, I urge a more careful scrutiny of the distinction and of the relation between the syntactically different uses. First a word about terminology: while Kahn labels the constructions 'absolute' and 'predicative', I shall call them 'complete' and 'incomplete', following recent practice (for example that of Owen in [18]), but reserving judgement on whether so sharp a distinction as the pair of terms suggests can be drawn.

So far we have considered the distinction of complete from incomplete uses of the verb 'to be', where the complete 'is' is thought of as the 'is' meaning 'exists'. A further aspect of the early twentieth-century legacy concerning the verb 'to be' is the doctrine of the 'is' of identity. Russell, pursuing Mill's theme, insisted on a further distinction within the incomplete use, dividing the 'is' which relates subject to predicate from the 'is' which expresses identity. Like Mill he accompanied this dogma with a complaint: 'It is a disgrace to the human race that it has chosen to employ the same word 'is' for the two entirely different ideas – a disgrace which a symbolic language of course remedies' (Russell [526], 172). Like the traditional dichotomy, this further subdivision of the incomplete 'is' has become – thanks more to Frege than to Russell – part of our philosophical bread and butter, enshrined in logic textbooks and in the formal apparatus of the predicate calculus, where the 'is' of identity is represented as a dyadic relation (as in a=b) while the predicative 'is', as in 'John is angry', disappears in the formalisation Fa. It is worth noting that, unlike the 'traditional dichotomy', which was recognised by grammar books and dictionaries, the subdivision of the incomplete use into the 'is' of identity and the 'is' of predication has remained a preoccupation of philosophers. Linguists have not been greatly concerned to mark off these two uses, and perhaps they were right. The reason for representing sentences containing the alleged 'is' of identity differently from those containing the mere copula or 'is' of predication is a recognition that arguments of the form:

a is b

a is c

therefore b is c

may be valid or not, and, the theory goes, they are valid when the 'is' is one of identity, and not when it isn't. The question whether, and if so where, Plato, Aristotle or some other writer explicitly distinguished the 'is' of identity from the 'is' of predication is beyond the scope of this paper. The distinction has been discerned in Plato's *Sophist* at 256ab, but it may be

nearer the mark to say that there Plato notes a distinction between sentences which express identity and those which express predication (participation), rather than a distinction between uses of 'is' in such sentences.[2] Indeed this seems to be the correct account of the matter: it is preferable to say that among sentences of the form 'a is b', some do and others don't express identity, rather than to say that some contain the 'is' of identity, others the 'is' of predication. This proposal avoids the suggestion that we could identify an 'is' of identity independently of knowing whether the sentence in which it is embedded is an identity sentence.[3]

The existence of at least these three distinct uses of 'is' was taken for granted by commentators and assumed to apply, by and large, to ancient Greek, though with some salient differences. These include the fact that Greek can and regularly does omit *esti* in the present tense, though not in other tenses, and that the complete 'is' is still very much a going concern, though more or less defunct in modern English. The fact that the *esti* of the copula can be omitted means that a predicative use of *esti* can convey a nuance over and above that of the mere copula (for instance connoting what really is F rather than merely appearing F, or what is enduringly F). And the fact that current English has more or less abandoned the use of the complete 'is' to mean 'exist' (as in Hamlet's 'To be or not to be'), while in Greek it is very much a going concern, may lead us to question whether the complete *esti* really shares the features of the 'is' which means (or used to mean) 'exist'.

Armed with these distinctions, interpreters have turned their critical gaze on the ancient texts. For those who assumed that the same uses of 'is' are to be found in ancient Greek *esti* there were obvious questions to ask:

> Which, if any, ancient writer among the Greek philosophers first drew explicit attention to the distinction between uses?
> Prior to their coming to explicit philosophical consciousness, were the distinctions implicitly observed, though not explicitly noted, or did a failure to observe the distinctions cause some philosophers to produce invalid arguments and confused theories?

A myriad different combinations of answers have been given to these questions. It has been thought that Parmenides, and Plato up to a certain point in his career, confused the complete 'is' of existence with the

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[2] Among those who interpret *Sophist* 256ab as drawing a distinction between two uses of incomplete *esti* ('is'), that of identity and that of predication, are Ackrill [187], 211–13, and Vlastos [213], esp. n. 46. *Contra*, see Bostock [190], 90 f. with refs. Lewis [154] contains an excellent discussion.

[3] Recent expressions of scepticism about the alleged 'is' of identity include Kahn [29], 372 n. 1 and Sommers [535].

predicative 'is', resulting in the curious theories of being which each espoused; that Plato in his later dialogue the *Sophist* recognised Parmenides' error (perhaps shared by his earlier self) and pointed out the different uses of 'is' – on some accounts (for example Ackrill [187], 211–13) he distinguished all three uses (complete/existential and the two subdivisions of the incomplete, the predicative 'is' and the 'is' of identity), on others (for example Vlastos [213], 288 n. 44) only the latter distinction. Some have thought that Plato never drew explicit attention to the distinction between the complete and the incomplete 'is', but was never in danger of confusing them, thanks to his knowledge of the language in which the distinction was so firmly entrenched. (This last, the view of Vlastos, I shall return to in section III.) If the distinction between the complete/existential use and the incomplete was not articulated by Plato, then, it was held, at least it can be credited to Aristotle, whose penchant for distinguishing the number of ways in which things are said led him to make many different claims about the multivocity of *esti*, one of which – his distinction between 'to be something' (*einai ti*) and 'to be *simpliciter*' (*einai haplōs*) – looks to be the very distinction we are after.

In section VI I discuss the passages where Aristotle draws this distinction, and suggest that things are by no means as simple as they look. Aristotle does not see the two uses as so sharply distinct and unrelated as the passages suggest at first sight, and he is not to be interpreted as straightforwardly distinguishing the existential from the predicative use of 'is'. But first, a look at Parmenides (section II), to set the scene, and at Plato, who has both been accused of falling into fallacy by failing to distinguish the complete from the incomplete 'is', and been credited (by some) with drawing that same distinction in his later dialogue the *Sophist* (sections, III, IV, V). I argue that no straight answer can be given to the two questions, for the conceptual scheme for *einai* (to be) within which the writers are operating does not normally allow us to say either that they fall into fallacy by ignoring the distinction between the existential and the predicative *esti* (for example) or that they deftly avoid fallacy by eschewing illicit moves from one use to another.

II Parmenides

Writing in verse some time in the fifth century B.C., Parmenides of Elea invented a philosophical method, the delineation of the only possible 'way of enquiry', and derived a set of startling metaphysical conclusions: that being (or what is) is ungenerated, imperishable, continuous, unchanging. His philosophical predecessors had investigated and speculated upon the origin and nature of the cosmos. Parmenides questioned the assump-

tions of such a project, by probing the preconditions of enquiry. The goddess who in Parmenides' poem promises insight into truth and mortal opinion announces that any enquiry must follow one of two ways: 'it is and that it is impossible for it not to be' or 'it is not and it is needful that it not be'. Here are the goddess's words:

> Come now, and I will tell you (and you must carry my account away with you when you have heard it) the only ways of inquiry that are to be thought of. The one, that it is and that it is impossible for it not to be, is the path of Persuasion, for she attends on Truth; the other, that it is not and that it is needful that it not be, that I declare to you is an altogether indiscernible track: for you could not know what is not – that cannot be done – nor indicate it.   (Fr. 2)

> What is there to be said and thought must needs be: for it is there for being but nothing is not.   (Fr. 6)

> For never shall this be forcibly maintained, that things that are not are, but you must hold back your thought from this way of enquiry.   (Fr. 7)

> There still remains just one account of a way, that it is. On this way there are very many signs, that being uncreated and imperishable it is, whole, of a single kind and unshaken and perfect. It never was nor will be, since it is now, all together, one, continuous. For what birth will you seek for it? How and whence did it grow? I shall not allow you to say nor to think from not being: for it is not to be said or thought that it is not.   (Fr. 8, lines 1–9)

> How could it come to be? For if it came into being, it is not: nor is it if it is ever going to be in the future. Thus coming to be is extinguished and perishing unheard of.

> But changeless within the limits of great bonds it exists without beginning or ceasing.
> (Fr. 8, lines 19–21 and 26–7) (Translations from Kirk, Raven and Schofield [43])

How should we understand the way of enquiry designated 'it is', *esti*? No subject of the verb is given: let us accept without further ado the prevailing view that Parmenides is talking about *whatever can be enquired into*; so that his initial point is this: concerning whatever can be enquired into (let it be O, for the object of enquiry), either O is and must be, or O is not and cannot be. What is meant by the claim that O is? The use of *esti* is complete; it has no completion and is most naturally interpreted as 'it exists'. That this is what the claim in fr. 2 means is suggested by the end of that fragment 'you could not know what is not nor indicate it'. If this is right, Parmenides is the first in a long line of thinkers to insist that only what exists can be known or

referred to or spoken of or thought about (adding fr. 6). Though highly plausible, the claim is a source of paradox, for do we not think and talk about things which don't exist, mythical creatures, for example, and future events, fictional characters, Santa Claus and so forth? And if it is hard to see how 'Santa Claus brings children presents' can be meaningful if there is no such personage, it is yet odder to express that with the claim 'Santa Claus does not exist.' How can the subject term of that sentence, the name 'Santa Claus', be meaningful if, as the rest of the sentence claims, no such person exists? Can it even be a name, if it names no one and nothing? In insisting that what can be thought of or spoken about must exist, Parmenides (on this interpretation) discovered a paradox in the sense of a thesis that seems at once necessarily true but falsified by everyday experience. We do talk about what doesn't exist, however impossible that seems in theory. And the conclusions he drew from this opening move are far more startling. But first we must look at an alternative interpretation of the opening move.

Kahn emphasises the poem's references to truth as the goal of enquiry, for example in fr. 2, and proposes that the poem's controlling thought is that what is enquired into should be something that can be known, and in turn that what is known must be true. Parmenides' path 'it is', then, becomes 'it is true' rather than 'it exists'. As we saw in section I above, in criticising the application of the 'traditional dichotomy' to ancient Greek, Kahn pointed out that a complete *esti* does not always mean 'exists' but may mean 'is true', as when Herodotus uses *ton eonta logon* (literally, the story that is) to mean 'the true story' (Herodotus 1.95.1, 1.116.5). The new proposal is that the traditional interpretation of Parmenides' *esti* as 'it exists' should be supplanted by the interpretation 'it is true', at least at the beginning of the poem's argument, when Parmenides links enquiry with knowledge and with 'it is'. For the thought that what is known must be true is indeed an unassailable starting-point, while the claim that what is known or referred to or thought about must exist is more questionable. But while this proposal emphasises the connection between knowledge and truth in favour of *esti* as 'is true', support for *esti* as 'exists' derives from fr. 6, 'what is there to be said and thought must needs be'. And as Kahn himself allows, the development of thought in the poem seems to require the sense 'exists' for *esti* at a later stage, even if it was not the key notion in the opening move. So let us follow that development.

As fr. 8 reveals, the object of enquiry, that which is, is declared to be uncreated and imperishable. Why? If this is to follow from the impossibility of the way 'it is not', then that must mean 'it does not exist' rather than 'it is not true' or 'it is not the case'. If to create something is to bring it about that

something which at one time does not exist does exist at a later time, then that is ruled unintelligible if we are prohibited from thinking or uttering 'does not exist'. So even if, as Kahn suggests, the guiding thought at the outset is the insistence on 'it is true', by fr. 8 the forbidden 'it is not' must be 'it does not exist'. Then come some further claims about the nature of what is, and by lines 26–8 of fr. 8 we find the claim that what is is changeless. Why? One response goes as follows: when a thing changes, it goes from being F to not being F, or from not being F to being F. Perhaps the ban on 'it is not' has now been illicitly extended to include a ban on 'it is not F'. If so, Parmenides has committed an unwarranted move from the complete 'is not' (i.e. does not exist) to the incomplete 'is not ...'. For while the former is certainly problematic, mere not being ... (for example not being green, or not being cold) could hardly be a proper object of philosophical suspicion. Mill's complaint of a fog which at an early period arose from overlooking the distinction between the 'is' of existence and the predicative 'is' may well derive in part from such a reading of Parmenides.

We can defend Parmenides against this accusation (of confusing not being (for example) green with not existing) by supplying him with the following principle (as in Barnes [40], 216): every change requires a generation or a destruction. When a green apple turns red, green perishes and red is created, or perhaps the complex object – the green apple – is destroyed and a new one – the red apple – is created. If generation is ruled out, because of the impossibility of 'it is not', then change which requires generation is also ruled out. On this reading Parmenides need forbid only 'is not' (complete), and not also 'is not F'. Read this way, no confusion between the complete 'is not' and the incomplete 'is not ...' is to be imputed to Parmenides. But for all that, as I argue in section V below, Plato in the *Sophist* presents the great man's thought in such a way as to suggest that Parmenides *did* include a ban on 'is not F' within his dismissal of 'is not'.

Though it does not try to adjudicate between interpretations, this brief foray into the much-dissected thought of Parmenides provides some insight into the importance of the topics of being and not being, of 'is' and 'is not', for Greek philosophy. For the arguments which decreed that what can be known or enquired into, in other words what is, must be free from creation, destruction and change set an agenda which later thinkers had to take account of. As we have seen, Parmenides' words have been interpreted in many different ways: some critics insist that but a single, univocal *esti*, the syntactically complete 'is' meaning 'exists', is needed to convey Parmenides' meaning, while Kahn's more nuanced reading suggests that first 'it is true', then 'it exists' (these are both complete uses), and finally the incomplete 'it is

...' are needed to capture the full sense of Parmenides' thought.[4] And as we shall see in the next section, the very same possibilities of interpretation offer themselves in a famous argument of Plato's about the connection between knowledge and what is, an argument in which the influence of Parmenides is unmistakable.

III   Plato in a muddle?

In one of his most famous discussions of the Forms, Plato slips in an alarming way between theses employing what look to be complete uses of the verb 'to be', and others where a complement is present. The goal of *Republic* v.475–80 is to show that knowledge differs from opinion, and that it is therefore those who have knowledge, *viz.* philosophers, who should rule. In the course of the argument he seems to argue not only that knowledge and opinion differ but also that their objects differ, for the object of knowledge is that which is, while the object of opinion is that which is and is not, also described as being 'between that which purely is and that which in no way is' (*Republic* 477a). Plato identifies the object of knowledge with the Forms, with the just itself, the beautiful itself, and so on, and the object of opinion with 'the many beautiful, the many just, etc. things'. What he means by the 'many beautifuls' I discuss briefly below; the Forms, such as the just itself, the beautiful itself, are for Plato immaterial and unchanging entities, perhaps properties, which exist independently of and prior to minds and material objects. They play an explanatory role in the nature of things, serve as the objects of knowledge and as guarantors of ethical objectivity. The argument is complex, much ink has been spilled over its interpretation, and I cannot do full justice to it here. It begins with the following exchanges, in which Socrates starts by asking Glaucon to reply on behalf of the opponent who tries to resist Socrates' claims about knowledge and opinion.

S. Tell me this: does one who knows know something, or nothing? You answer me on his behalf.
G. I answer that one who knows knows something.
S. Does he know what is, or what is not?
G. What is. For how could something that is not be known?

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[4] Kirk, Raven and Schofield [43], 246 suggest that Parmenides' use of *estin* is 'simultaneously existential and predicative, but not therefore confused' and argue in favour of this that for Parmenides 'non-existence is being nothing at all, i.e. having no attributes; and ... to exist is in effect to be something or other'. The substance of this account seems to me quite correct and, as I argue in section IV, it can be said to apply also to Plato's understanding of the complete *esti* and its negation. But I urge caution in the use of expressions such as 'simultaneously existential and predicative' and 'for Parmenides non-existence is ...' as if it were unproblematic to use these terms in elucidating Parmenides' thought.

S. Then we are sure of the following, however we may look at it, that what fully is is fully knowable and what is not in any way is totally unknowable.
G. Absolutely.
S. Fine. Now if there is something such that it both is and is not, would it not lie between that which purely is and that which in no way is?
G. Yes.
S. Then knowledge is matched with what is, ignorance necessarily with what is not, and we need to search for something between knowledge and ignorance to be matched with this thing which is between ⟨what is and what is not⟩, if indeed there is such a thing.   (*Republic* 476e6–477b1)

Thus the argument begins with the claim that *one who knows knows something; indeed, something which is; for what is not could not be known.* Here, it appears, we have what Aristotle would call an example of 'to be *simpliciter*', a complete use which we are inclined to translate as 'exist': one who knows knows something, a thing which exists; for how could something non-existent be known? But an alternative suggests itself. As already noted, a complete *esti* is sometimes best translated 'is true'. Bearing this in mind, we must ask whether we shouldn't import this translation into Plato's original premise, *one who knows knows something that is, for how can what is not be known?* This too gives Plato an acceptable starting-point; what is known must be true, for what is not true cannot be an object of knowledge. As we saw, this was one favoured candidate for the interpretation of Parmenides' leading thought that what can be enquired into and known must be.

So, just as with Parmenides, we seem to be faced with a choice between two interpretations of the opening premise of Plato's argument, each involving a complete use of *esti*, a choice, that is, between *one who knows knows what exists*, and *one who knows knows something true*. The sequel, we can only hope, will make clear how we should choose. But we are in for a shock. Plato claims that we shall find the object of opinion when we find something that is and is not (*Republic* 478d5). Does this mean something which both exists and does not exist? Heaven forbid. The idea of finding something which is both true and not true is perhaps somewhat less problematic. One might think of a sense in which a single proposition could be partly true, partly false. Alternatively, one might interpret the suggestion that the object of opinion is what is and is not (call this claim O) so that it applied not to propositions taken singly but to the class of opinions, in other words, as making the correct point that opinion is both true and false (i.e. some opinions are true, some false) while knowledge is only true, never false.

But when Plato reveals his hand, his point is this: the objects of opinion

are the many just, the many beautiful, etc. things, and, Plato goes on to say, each of the many just things is also unjust, each of the many beautiful things also ugly, and in general each of the many Fs no more is what it is said to be than it is not that (479b).

First we must ask how we should understand the expression 'the many beautifuls' and the associated claim that each of them is also ugly (and therefore not beautiful). It is natural to suppose that Plato means the many sensible instances of beauty – this woman, that statue – and is claiming that each instance, while beautiful in one setting or respect or comparison, is ugly in a different respect, a different setting or in comparison with a more beautiful thing. Alternatively, on a more subtle interpretation, the many beautifuls are the many sensible properties (such as being brightly coloured) which people wrongly identify with beauty.[5] And the claim that each of these is both beautiful and ugly will amount to this: each of the 'many beautifuls', such as being brightly coloured, will be both ⟨what makes some things⟩ beautiful and ⟨what makes other things⟩ ugly. Either way the claim is that each of the many Fs both is F and is not F, and here Plato no longer uses the complete 'is', despite saying that to find the object of opinion we were to search for that which is and is not, in contrast to that which purely is, the object of knowledge. So in developing his claim that the object of opinion is that which is and is not (claim O), Plato insists that each of the many Fs is and is not F. This seems to rule out the promising interpretation of O mooted above: opinions are and are not true (i.e. some are true, some false). It is ruled out on two counts, first, because Plato moves to the claim that the objects of opinion are and are not F – an incomplete use of *esti* – and secondly, because he now insists that *each* of the many beautifuls is and is not beautiful, while the promising interpretation required O to mean that some opinions are (true) while others are not (i.e. are false).[6]

The puzzle, of course, is this: how are these two claims related?

(1) Each of the many Fs is and is not F.
(2) Each of the many Fs is and is not.

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[5] Fine [150] in her discussion of this argument defends this second interpretation of 'the many beautifuls'. She argues for a veridical 'is' (i.e. 'is true') in the interpretation of the opening premise (knowledge is of what is true) and of claim O (that opinion is of what is and what is not). Though she accepts that in the crucial claim 'the many Fs are and are not F' Plato has moved to a predicative (incomplete) 'is', she believes that this can be dovetailed with the veridical use which, in her view, predominates in the argument. See also Fine [151].

[6] Fine [151] has an account which aims to circumvent this difficulty (91–3). She argues for a 'convincing link' between the claim that beliefs (opinions, in my version) are both true and false (while knowledge is always true) and the claim that each of the many Fs are both F and not-F.

Or again, what is the relation between

(3) The Form F is fully and purely F.
(4) The Form F fully and purely is?

On the face of it, if we take the uses of 'is' in (2) and (4) to be complete, (2) and (4) say something quite different from (1) and (3) respectively, and (2) at least seems ridiculous: how could the many Fs both exist and not exist? This looks to be just the sort of confusion of which Mill complained in his remark about the fog (caused by the neglect of the distinction in meanings of 'to be') which diffused itself at an early period over the whole surface of metaphysics (see section I above). Various possibilities suggest themselves:

(a) Plato intends (2) to be an inference from (1), and is (presumably) unaware of the equivocation on 'is' which renders the inference invalid; likewise with (4) and (3). Those who think a fallacy is involved here are unlikely to hold that Plato was aware of it, for, though conscious fallacy is occasionally to be found in Plato, he is hardly likely to have employed it in the service of his theory of Forms.[7]

(b) There is no fallacy because there is no inference: (2) is not, for Plato, inferred from (1), but is an elliptical expression of (1), and does not, despite appearances, contain a complete use of the verb 'to be'; again, the same goes for (4)'s relation to (3).

These two views, (a) and (b), share the feature that they both assume that Mill's traditional dichotomy between the complete 'is' which means 'exist' and the incomplete 'is' can be applied to 'is' in ancient Greek; they differ over whether Plato's position involves (a) a fallacious inference from the incomplete to the complete use, or (b) no fallacy because no inference; on (b) Plato is seen as steering well clear of the complete/existential use at all points. For the adherents of the traditional dichotomy, (b) is the more attractive option, and it has been stoutly defended.

One such defender is Annas in her account of the *Republic* v argument (Annas [146], ch. 8). Another is Vlastos ([152]; see also [156]), though his claims are not made with particular reference to the argument at *Republic* v, but in general elucidation of Plato's striking descriptions of the Forms as 'more real' (*mallon onta*, using the participle 'being', *Republic* 515d), 'really real' (literally, 'beingly being', *Republic* 597d), and so forth. Why does Plato say that Forms are really real but sensibles not really real? He cannot mean that sensibles do not really exist. Vlastos reminds us that the English expression 'are not real' has two distinct uses: to say that unicorns are not

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[7] *Euthydemus* 283c–d contains a deliberately fallacious argument which is often held to depend upon equivocation between existential and predicative *esti*. But I argue in Brown [191], 57 that this is not the correct account of that fallacy.

real is to deny that they exist, but to say that these flowers are not real is to presuppose that they do exist but deny they are genuine flowers. In effect, Vlastos distinguishes and applies to Greek *esti* ('is') a complete, one-place use from an incomplete, two-place use of 'is real', in line with the distinction between the 'is' of existence and that of predication ([152], 47). He insists that Plato's designations of the Forms as really real and his denigration of particulars as 'not really real' must be understood in terms of 'real' as in 'real flowers', not in terms of the 'real' which means 'existent'. (Note that the Greek word for 'real' throughout – *on* – is simply the participle of the verb 'to be'.) For though Plato nowhere explicitly states or discusses the difference between the 'is' of existence and that of predication, he none the less, claims Vlastos, observes the difference in his writings. For Vlastos is convinced that there is just such a distinction in the Greek verb *einai*; even a Greek child would, without being aware of it, have had a knowledge of the difference between the 'is' in 'Troy is famous' and 'Troy is' (or rather, their Greek equivalents).

None will dispute that to understand Plato's views about Forms we must start by recognising that the Form, for example the beautiful, is purely and unqualifiedly beautiful, in contrast to the many sensible beautifuls which are beautiful only in some qualified way. In understanding the superior being of the Forms, we must start from the incomplete 'is', the way in which the Form F is F. My disagreement with Vlastos is not on that point, but over his claim that this use of 'is' must be, and was by Plato and every Greek speaker, kept clearly distinct from the complete, and by implication existential, 'is' to be found in 'Troy is'.

I shall label (b) the ellipse interpretation. Its defenders argue that (2) and (4) must be elliptical, for, if taken at face value as containing a complete 'is', this would mean 'exist', which cannot be what Plato intended. For that would have committed him to a theory of degrees of existence, which is absurd, and to holding that the many sensibles both do and don't exist, and are between existence and non-existence.

I agree that the above sound absurd when phrased using the English 'exist'. But we do not have to infer that since 'is' in (2) and (4) cannot mean 'exist', these must be ellipses of (1) and (3) respectively (as Vlastos [152], 48, [156], 63 with n. 21 and Annas [146], 198 argue). Rather, I suggest, they should be taken at face value as containing complete uses of 'is', but ones which are closely related to the predicative, incomplete, 'is' in a way I now outline.

IV A suggested analogy

Drawing on an earlier proposal (Brown [191]), I want to suggest that in ancient Greek a complete use of 'is', as in 'The Gods are' or 'The form

F fully is', is closely related to the incomplete 'is'. The connection is akin to that between the incomplete and complete uses (in English and other languages, including Greek) of verbs such as 'teach' and 'eat'. One can say 'Jane teaches' or 'John is eating' as well as 'Jane teaches French' or 'John is eating grapes.'[8] The former, complete uses are related to the incomplete in the following ways: 'John is eating grapes' entails 'John is eating', which in turn is equivalent to 'John is eating something.' One who hears 'John is eating' can properly ask 'eating what?'. Despite this, it would be wrong to say that 'John is eating' is elliptical. In like vein I have proposed that the complete 'is' in Greek allows further completion: to any assertion that such-and-such is, it can properly be asked 'is what?'. This is why it is misleading to link the complete 'is' too closely to 'exist': for the follow-up question 'exists what?' is not permissible.[9]

While this proposal allows us to classify some uses as complete, others as incomplete, it envisages a continuous spectrum of uses with no sharp boundary between the complete and the incomplete, and *a fortiori* no boundary to which a semantic distinction could correspond. The evidence suggests just such a spectrum of uses. Consider the following selection of literal translations of typical Greek sentences containing 'to be':

(a) Socrates is snub-nosed.
(b) Socrates is a poet.
(c) Socrates is in the *agora*.
(d) They are silently (adverb used adjectivally, see Kahn [29], 151).
(e) It is in every way, in some way, purely, etc. (as said by Plato, for example of Forms).
(f) The gods are for ever.
(g) Socrates is no longer.
(h) The gods are.

How do we distinguish syntactically incomplete from complete? If we insist that the presence of any completion makes the 'is' incomplete, then only (h), 'The gods are', counts as a complete use. (For a non-philosophical occurrence of this, see Menander, *Dyskolos* 639, where, on seeing Knemon, who had insulted him, fallen into a well, the cook exclaims 'the gods do exist' (sc. and have punished him).) But uses with temporal adverbs, such as (f) and (g), are also taken to be complete or absolute, rather than incomplete or predicative (see, for example, Kahn [29], 240), in part no doubt because we would paraphrase them with 'exist', (a), (b) and (c), where 'is' is the nominal or locative copula, are the typical examples of an incomplete use. But (d) and (e), with adverbial completions, are hard to classify and may be called

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[8] In suggesting the analogy between 'be' and verbs such as 'teach' and 'eat' I should like to repeat the acknowledgement to Michael Woods made in my [191].

[9] Note that this was not so in Latin, where *existere* could be a copula.

borderline cases. In (d) the adverb functions as an adjective, so it may be classed with (a), perhaps, but (e) is particularly problematic, and involves the very use we find in philosophically important passages in Plato. Should it be classed with (f) and (g) as complete? Or should we suppose that 'it is in some way' is equivalent to the predicative 'it is something', or 'for some F, it is F'? This attractive suggestion runs into difficulty when we try to apply it to the locution Plato occasionally uses: 'it is in every way'. This can hardly mean 'For all F, it is F' since this could not sensibly be asserted of anything. The examples in (e) show most clearly the difficulty of trying to pigeonhole uses of *esti* in Greek as either complete or incomplete. They are, as it were, on the point where one use shades into the other, and we would be wrong, because imposing our own categories, to suppose that there must be an answer which categorises them firmly as either complete or incomplete, either one-place or two-place. Many critics insist that any use must be categorisable as complete or incomplete, and, if complete as meaning either 'is true' or 'exists', but just because a clear answer can sometimes be given, it doesn't follow that it always can. I suggest, then, that there is a certain seamlessness, or continuity, between uses of *esti* which the dichotomy 'complete/incomplete' masks. I suggest there is no point at which a Greek speaker would detect a quantum leap from one *esti* to another. Further, that even where uses can be safely classed as either incomplete (as in the first three) or as complete (as in the last), these are thought of as connected in very much the way 'Fred teaches Greek' connects with 'Fred teaches.'

A further feature of my proposal concerns the question of ellipsis. On my view the argument in *Republic* v moves from (1) to (2) and from (3) to (4), while on the ellipse view (2) and (4) are merely elliptical restatements of (1) and (3) respectively. Is there a way of deciding between these interpretations? Where I suggest that the claim that the Form F fully is is derived from, but is not identical with, the claim that the Form F is fully F, the other view sees it as simply an elliptical restatement of the latter. Vlastos argues that if it is not an ellipse, it must mean that the Form F fully exists. Since Plato was quite clear about the difference between these two claims, he must have intended one rather than the other, and the one he intended was the elliptical reading. But I suggest that he was not quite clear about the distinction between the two, for the reason that the linguistic and conceptual scheme within which he spoke, thought and wrote did not contain the distinction Vlastos alleges.

Now it is certainly true that in some cases an apparently complete use of 'is' must be supplied with an elided complement. In fact this is far less frequent in ancient Greek than in modern English, which has: 'John was angry and Jane was as well' (sc. was *angry* as well); 'Is she ready?' 'No, she

isn't' (sc. ready). But while Greek does not have these frequent ellipses of the complement, ellipse is to be found in certain contexts, notably where there is a contrast between what is really such-and-such and what only appears to be such (for an example see *Sophist* 233c6–8). In many cases Vlastos is certainly right in his contention that when Plato contrasts the Form which really is with the sensibles which are and are not, or which only appear to be, a complement F has been elided and must be supplied. He instances Plato's odd description of constitutions which, being less than the best, are 'not genuine or really real' (*oud' ontōs ousas* (*Statesman* (*Plt.*) 293e)): each epithet, 'not genuine' and 'not really real', requires completion – they are not genuine constitutions.

But in other cases the matter is not so clear-cut. I illustrate this from Plato's discussion of representative art (*mimētikē technē*) in *Republic* X, where his aim is to show that the products of the artist (painter or poet) are two removes from reality. He makes the strange claim that everyday objects such as the beds a carpenter makes are already at one remove from reality (for only the Form of bed is truly real). At 597a4–5 Plato says that the carpenter, since he doesn't make what is, doesn't make the real (*ei mē ho esti poiei, ouk an to on poioi*). Now here there certainly is an ellipse. We must supply ⟨bed⟩ from the earlier lines; what the carpenter makes is not the real bed, because it is not 'the bed itself', the Form of bed. But though what the carpenter makes is not the real bed, it is still something, indeed still a bed of sorts. So in this case when we find the claim that what the carpenter makes is not real, not what is, we must regard it as elliptical and supply ⟨bed⟩.

However, this notion of producing a semblance, not the real thing, has just been introduced (596de) via a different example, the example of producing things such as the sun, trees, animals, etc. with a mirror. What you produce thus are things which appear, *phainomena*, but are not in reality (*ou mentoi onta tēi alētheiai*). Can we say with equal certainty that here too we have an ellipse? That Plato's point is that what you see in a mirror appears to be but is not a tree? Might his point not be this: what you see in a mirror is something which only appears but is not (or, as we should say, does not exist)? Vlastos would argue that 'appears but is not' *either* is elliptical for 'appears F but is not F' *or* is complete and means 'appears but does not exist', and that Plato must have been quite clear about the difference between these two claims. But I suggest that this makes matters too clear-cut. In the one case – that of the carpenter's bed and the painter's bed, which appear to be but are not real beds – the elliptical reading is demanded; in the other the decision is not so clear. It may well be that, if pressed, Plato would have said that likewise the tree produced by holding a mirror in sunlight is indeed not a real tree but is still something, *viz.* an

image, i.e. that he would accept the ellipse reading of 'they appear but are not in reality'. But it is far less obvious in this case than in the case of the carpenter's bed, and my point is the following: that Plato chose to introduce us to the idea that the carpenter's bed is not real, not one that is, by using the example of trees, etc. in a mirror which appear but are not in reality suggests that he did not observe so sharp a distinction between the two-place and the one-place 'is' as Vlastos maintains.

The evidence of the *Republic* and other middle dialogues, then, which has perforce been sketchily and dogmatically presented above, suggests the picture for which I've argued. In arguing for the superior status of the Forms, Plato employs both incomplete and complete uses of the verb 'to be', saying (or at least implying, as at *Symposium* (*Symp.*) 211a) that both *the Form, beautiful, is purely and fully beautiful* and *the Form purely and fully is*. We need say neither that Plato moves illicitly from a predicative to an existential 'is' (view a) nor that the apparently complete uses are merely elliptical restatements of the incomplete (view b). Rather, the claim that the Form F purely and fully is is derived from, but is not a mere elliptical restatement of, the claim that the Form F is purely and fully F. Complete being is intimately related to, and derived from, incomplete being – being such and such – without merely reducing to it.

V The *Sophist*

In discussing some famous arguments in the *Republic* I have argued for a certain understanding of how Plato saw the relation between such statements as 'The Form F is fully F' and 'The Form F fully is', an understanding which obviates some of the traditional questions about whether Plato illicitly infers an existential from a predicative 'is'. I have not yet discussed what, on the model I suggest, would be the relation between negative uses of 'is', complete and incomplete. To do so I turn to the *Sophist*.

The *Sophist* is one of Plato's late, so-called critical dialogues; written after the central dialogues such as the *Republic*, it explicitly promises to face a problem about not being bequeathed by Parmenides, the ban on saying that what is not is, or that what is is not (see fr. 7, quoted in section II above). The chief speaker in the dialogue, a stranger from Elea (Parmenides' own city), raises a variety of problems about not being (236–41), before promising to solve them by tackling Parmenides head on (241d). Here was Plato's chance to make explicit any distinctions embedded in the verb 'to be', and to analyse and expose any errors, in Parmenides or in his own earlier writings, which depended on confusing different uses of the verb. As noted in section I, many scholars have read this dialogue as drawing one or more of the 'traditional' distinctions.

But though much painstaking analysis fills the central part of the *Sophist*, the results disappoint those who hope to find a clear disambiguation of uses of *esti* which would expose earlier confusions. I cannot offer here a full account of what I take to be the results of the *Sophist*, far less a defence of such an account, but confine myself to a few points. To the question whether the dialogue distinguishes an 'is' of identity from an 'is' of predication, I have indicated my answer: that it does not, but it does draw an important distinction between identity-sentences and predications (see section I and n. 2 above). Here I focus on the question whether and if so how it distinguishes complete from incomplete uses. I shall suggest that Plato developed a better theory about the negative 'is not' than his argumentation in the *Republic* suggests, while continuing to treat the relation between the complete use (X is) and the incomplete (X is F) in the way I have described in section IV, that is, by analogy with the relation between 'X teaches' and 'X teaches singing'.

Recall that in discussing the argument in *Republic* v I suggested that Plato moves from

(1) The many Fs are and are not F   to
(2) The many Fs are and are not.

While the positive half of this inference is unproblematic, the negative part is very odd. How is it supported? Here we face the question of the relation between the two negations, 'X is not F' and 'X is not.' Recalling the analogy I discussed in section IV, we should expect the following schema, which I label H (for Healthy).

X is F → X is
X is not → X is not F, X is not G, etc. (i.e. for all F, X is not F)

But in the argument from the *Republic*, in arguing from (1) to (2) above, Plato seems to operate with a different schema, Schema U (for Unhealthy):

X is F   → X is   (this line is the same on each schema)
X is not F   → X is not.

The difference lies in the second line, where the second schema allows the inference from 'X is not F' to 'X is not.' To the modern eye, this is unsound, just as it would be unsound to argue from 'Fred doesn't teach singing' to 'Fred doesn't teach.' Dancy [301] suggests that, if the unhealthy schema is operative, the complete 'X is not' may be understood as 'there is some mode of being which X lacks'. We seem to find this move from 'X is not F' to 'X is not' at a point in the early, paradox-mongering section of the *Sophist*. One of the puzzles concerns the definition of an image. It is argued that since an image is not really that which it is an image of (i.e. since an image of an F is not really F), it both is in a way (since it is an image) and is not really (since it

is not really F) (240b). As with the similar argument in *Republic* v, we want to know whether 'X is in a way and is not really' is merely an elliptical restatement of 'X is an image but is not really an F', or an inference from it. And again, if we have an inference here, it is the negative half which causes trouble: why should 'X is not really an F' entail 'X is not really'? Schema U seems to be operating here, and it presented Plato with a problem which necessitated a rethink. In the *Republic*, the contrast between Forms and sensibles was to lie in the fact that Forms simply are, while sensibles are and are not. But as Plato will insist in the *Sophist*, everything, Forms included, would turn out to 'be and not be', for 'in the case of each of the Forms, there is much that it is and an indefinite number of things it is not' (*Sophist* 256e). So if he continues to infer 'X is not' from 'X is not F', then it must be said of Forms too that they are and are not (see Dancy [301], 52).

In the constructive section of the *Sophist*, Plato responds by a new proposal about 'is not'. Since it is true of a Form as much as of anything else that 'it is many things and is not an indefinite number of things', this cannot be allowed to impute unvarnished not being to a Form, or indeed to anything. So Plato distinguishes in the *Sophist* what he calls the contrary of being (*to mēdamōs on*, that which is not in any way) from the mere negation of being (*to mē on*), and insists that the latter must always be understood as not being something. He rejects outright *that which is not in any way* as a notion having no application whatsoever (*Sophist* 258e–259a). The only use of 'is not' which he allows is a use in which it has a completion (X is not F).[10] Hence Plato sets his face against schema U, which led him into difficulties once he realised that Forms too 'are ... and are not ...'. We can perhaps say that he accepted schema H instead, for the rejection of plain not being (the so-called contrary of being) rests on its equivalence with 'not being anything at all', in other words 'for all F, is not F'. Because he regards the complete 'is not' as equivalent to 'is not anything at all', he disallows such a complete 'is not'. Some remarks on this:

(1) This move seems to concede to Parmenides the unthinkability of 'is not' in its complete use, so the attack on 'father Parmenides' is not as

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[10] There is a troublesome problem which need not detain us here: much of the time in the *Sophist* Plato explicates 'Kind K is not F' as 'Kind K is different from F', i.e. as a denial of identity, rather than as the negative predication we should expect. If he does offer to analyse 'Kind K is not F' where this is a negative predication – and whether and if so how he does is a highly controversial matter – the analysis is still somehow in terms of 'is different from'. For present purposes it is enough to note that the only uses of 'is not' he allows are those which have some completion – whether they are, as we should put it, negative predications or negative identities.

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comprehensive as we might have expected. Plato insists on a role for 'is not', but only when it is completed in some way or other. But the Eleatic stranger, the main speaker in the *Sophist*, none the less presents this as a rebuttal of Parmenides, from which we may perhaps infer that Plato regarded it as an important point against Parmenides to establish the difference between 'is not' and 'is not ...', and to legitimise the second while conceding the unintelligibility of the first. So Plato, apparently, did hold Parmenides guilty of confusing the complete with the incomplete 'is not' (see section II above).

(2) Plato's refusal to countenance a use of the complete 'is not' tells against a suggestion that may lie behind the remark of Vlastos (quoted in section IV). Vlastos insisted that any Greek child (and *a fortiori* Plato) would have known the difference between the *is* in 'Troy is famous' and in 'Troy is', suggesting (though not asserting) that a Greek child would know that the first was true while the second was false. But though this might seem obvious to us, Plato could not have agreed, for he firmly resisted a role for the complete 'is not'. A locution such as 'Troy is not' is outlawed by the arguments of the *Sophist* unless it can be supplied with a completion.

(3) Equally important, Plato never queries the positive claim, common to both schemata, that 'X is F' entails 'X is.' Another of the early paradoxes depends on this assumption. It goes as follows:

> What can be said about what is not? Whatever we try to say about it involves somehow attributing being to it. Even if we conclude that what is not is unthinkable, unsayable, indefinable, etc., we appear to be contradicting ourselves, for in saying that it is unthinkable, are we not saying that it is?   (Paraphrase of *Sophist* 238e)

An obvious way out of this paradox is offered by the traditional dichotomy, in the light of which someone could urge that the 'is' in 'is unthinkable' is distinct from the (existential) 'is'. But Plato does not offer this (to us) obvious solution to the puzzle. Whereas other false moves underlying the early paradoxes are exposed and corrected, Plato nowhere queries the entailment between 'X is F' and 'X is', even where this has led to paradox. Indeed the remainder of the discussion in the *Sophist* suggests that Plato accepted the entailment between 'X is F' and 'X is', even though this led to paradox. How Aristotle tackled the same problem we shall see in section VI.

We are now ready to consider a famous passage in the *Sophist* where Plato does appear to draw the distinction between a syntactically complete and an incomplete use of *esti*. The point is not made as part of a general solution to

the problems involved in being and not being, but for a more limited purpose, to prove the distinctness of two of his 'very great kinds', *being* and *different*. (Kinds in the *Sophist* are the descendants of Forms in the middle dialogues.) To effect this proof he contrasts 'is' with 'different' by pointing out that 'of things that are, some are said to be themselves by themselves (*auta kath' hauta*), while others are said to be in relation to other things (*pros alla*). What is different, on the other hand, is always said in relation to something different' (255cd). The point seems to be that 'is different' always requires completion (different from such-and-such), while 'is' sometimes has such a completion, but sometimes stands on its own, requiring no completion. (You can say 'Justice is' as well as 'Justice is a virtue', but you cannot say 'Justice is different', only 'Justice is different from such-and-such.') If this is the correct interpretation,[11] it shows that Plato was prepared to exploit the availability of both syntactic forms of 'is' for the purposes of this argument. But he makes no further use of this distinction, in a dialogue whose concerns might seem to demand it, and this confirms the view for which I have been arguing, that though distinct, the uses were felt to be so closely connected that nothing important in the philosophy of being hung upon the distinction.

To sum up the results of this too brief discussion of the *Sophist*: in a dialogue in which Plato promises to challenge Parmenides, he does so by insisting on the legitimacy of the expression 'is not ...' while refusing to allow the expression 'is not in any way', his understanding of the complete 'is not'. Thus he accepts Parmenides' strictures against the complete 'is not' while chiding him for not allowing *any* use of 'is not'; from which we may infer that Plato thought Parmenides erred in not distinguishing the complete from the incomplete 'is not'. But Plato does not go so far as to insist on finding a role for the complete 'is not'. If, as I have tentatively suggested, he had erred in *Republic* v by allowing the inference from 'X is not F' to 'X is not',

[11] Another highly disputed issue. Owen [207] and Frede [192] take a different view, arguing that two *incomplete* uses of *esti* are distinguished under the labels *auto kath'hauto* and *pros allo*, and not, as on the view here defended, a complete and an incomplete use. However, Owen also holds, and here I agree, that though Plato distinguishes different tasks of the verb 'to be', *being* remains for him a unitary concept.

Note that the distinction at 255c10–11 is drawn in terms of how things that are are said to be, in other words, between uses of 'is'. The claim is then made that the Form Being shares in both the *auto kath'hauto* and the *pros ti*, and there may be a temptation to interpret this as a metaphysical claim that being can be both relative and absolute. However, claims about Forms (i.e. Kinds) in this section of the *Sophist* are cashed in terms of the cognate predicates, so the new formulation at d4–5 does not go beyond the point made at 255c10–11.

he here shows that such a move is illegitimate; in other words, he can be read as operating with what I called the Healthy Schema. He continues to assume that it is legitimate to infer 'X is' from 'X is F', despite the paradox this can entail, and though he does draw attention in the famous passage at 255cd to a distinction between complete and incomplete uses of 'is', the close connection between them meant that he could not exploit the distinction in the way those who accept the 'traditional dichotomy' would expect.

VI   Aristotle

In discussing Plato, we have seen good reason to doubt the claim that any Greek speaker implicitly recognised a difference between the complete and the incomplete 'is', to doubt indeed that any clear semantic distinction existed. Though a syntactic distinction between complete and incomplete is undeniable, and may have been noted and used by Plato for a specific purpose at *Sophist* 255cd, it is a distinction where the extremes are clear but the boundary indistinct, and one which offered no help in solving problems of being or of not being.

What of Aristotle's testimony? Does he not expose the distinction, and the fallacy of inferring 'Troy is' from 'Troy is famous'? The distinction that he labels that between 'to be something' and 'to be *haplōs*' – to be *simpliciter* – certainly looks very like what Kahn labelled the traditional dichotomy. Here are some texts:

> (i) *Posterior Analytics* II,1.89b32–5
> (Among the things we seek by enquiry are)
> whether a centaur or a god is or is not – I mean whether one is or is not *simpliciter* and not whether one is white or not. And knowing that it is, we seek what it is, for example so what is a god? or what is a man?

> (ii) *Sophistici Elenchi* v.167a1–2
> (Discussing a certain kind of fallacious inference)
> for instance, if what is not is thought about, it does not follow that what is not is. For it is not the same thing to be something and to be *simpliciter*.

> (iii) *Sophistici Elenchi* v.180a36–8
> To be something and to be are not the same (for then if what is not is something, it also is *simpliciter*).

Is not Aristotle here drawing attention to the very two uses Mill discusses, the traditional dichotomy between complete (is *simpliciter*) and incomplete use (is something), and assigning the meaning 'exist' to the former? To ask whether a centaur is (passage (i)) is surely to ask whether one exists. But this meaning – is Aristotle not insisting? – is not to be found in the use 'is something', and one falls into fallacy (he tells us in passages (ii) and (iii)) if

one tries to infer 'X is' from 'X is something.' Here the point is illustrated by the example of inferring that what is not is from the truth that what is not is thought about. It doesn't matter whether 'what is not' designates some abstract concept or something that is not, such as my first grandchild. In neither case does being thought about entail being.[12] Elsewhere he uses the example of inferring 'Homer is' from 'Homer is a poet' (*de Interpretatione* 21a25–33), though the distinction is there labelled differently. The point is that 'Homer is' implies the falsehood that Homer is alive, so it cannot be validly inferred from 'Homer is a poet.'

At first glance it certainly looks as if Aristotle is pointing out the difference between 'X exists' and 'X is F', warning of the dangers of inferring the former from the latter, and thereby giving in a nutshell the answer Plato should have given in the *Sophist* to the problem of what is not as discussed in the previous section. Aristotle here appears to have given an easy answer to the problem that in saying 'what is not is unthinkable', you are committed to 'what is not is'. The reply seems to be this: in saying that what is not is F you are not saying that what is not is *simpliciter*, that it exists. So you are not after all contradicting yourself: end of problem.

But a closer look at Aristotle's argumentation shows that his distinction is not Mill's:

(1) When discussing the fallacious inference in (ii) and (iii) he classifies it as (what has come to be known as) a fallacy *secundum quid*, the fallacy of moving from a qualified to an unqualified assertion, as when one moves from 'The Indian is white in the tooth' to 'The Indian is white', or from 'He swears truly that he will perjure himself' to 'He swears truly.' In each case the fallacy lies in taking a qualified (*pros ti*) use to license an unqualified use. But there is no suggestion that 'is white' in the two occurrences differ semantically, rather that being white in the tooth is not a way of being white *kuriōs*, in the proper manner (167a17). Similarly being thought about is not a proper way of being. In general, Aristotle believes (I think) that the inference from 'X is F' to 'X is' is a perfectly safe one (just like that from 'Jane teaches French' to 'Jane teaches'), but that for some values of F (being thought about, being dead) the inference is unsafe, but the blame, as it were, lies on the particular value of F, not on a move from one meaning of 'is' to another. The point is a crucial one.

(2) In passage (i), Aristotle distinguishes the questions *whether it is* and *what it is*. A few chapters later (II,7.92b5–8) he insists that it is necessary to know that a thing is in order to know what it is; the answer to the question

whether it is must be 'yes' before one can know what it is. (Compare: in order to know what John is eating, one must know that John is eating.) Where the answer to the question whether it is is 'no', as with a centaur or a goatstag, one cannot say what it is; one can only say what the name signifies. This suggests that Aristotle saw a close connection between the statement 'X is' and the statement 'X is . . .', at least where the latter tells you what X is (which of course 'What is not is thought about' does not). Unless X is, you can't say what X is: again the connection between the complete and incomplete uses shines out.

(3) The distinction between being something and being *simpliciter* is by no means the only or the most important distinction Aristotle draws between the ways in which 'is' or being is said. In his philosophical dictionary, *Metaphysics* v.7, he distinguishes four kinds of 'is': to be accidentally, to be essentially, 'is' in the sense 'is true' (or perhaps 'is truly'), and 'is' meaning 'is potentially'. The 'is something'/'is *simpliciter*' distinction is not on parade. Elsewhere he goes to great lengths to explain that 'is' is 'said in as many ways' as the categories, depending on whether a substance, a quality, a quantity, etc. is (see, for example, *Met.* IV.2; see also VIII.2.) Now this might appear to be a further subdivision of the complete/existential 'is', but Aristotle doesn't stick to a single way of making his point. He uses both complete and incomplete 'is', and sometimes it is hard to tell which use he is analysing. For instance, his point about ice, defined by its composition, may be either of the following:

for ice to be is for it to be compacted in such a way

or

to be ice is to be compacted in such and such a way (*Met.* 1042b27–8).

It is hard to tell, and the truth is that it doesn't matter; it is wrong to think that we must decide whether Aristotle was analysing existential or predicative uses in his remarks on how 'is' differs with (and sometimes within) the categories. While modern logic has focused on the difference between the 'is' meaning 'exists' and the predicative 'is', Aristotle placed far more emphasis on what he took to be the different uses or senses connected with the different categories.

What these points show, I suggest, is the following: though Aristotle does distinguish 'is something' from 'is *simpliciter*', his treatment of the distinction does not suggest that he saw here a semantic distinction, or even a syntactic distinction of general importance. The move from 'is F' to 'is *simpliciter*' is disallowed only where the predicate 'F' is for some reason

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12 A fascinating discussion of medieval solutions to the problem posed by 'being thought about' may be found in 'The Chimaera's Diary' by S. Ebbesen in [30].

suspect (Point 1). Indeed, Aristotle insists on the inter-relations of the questions 'Is X?' and 'What is X?' (Point 2). Finally, the distinctions he does consider philosophically important – chiefly that between essential and accidental being, and the different ways in which, as he puts it, 'being is said' which correspond to the different categories – cut across the syntactic distinction between complete and incomplete, and do not correspond to the semantic distinction between 'exists' and the copula (Point 3).[13]

Conclusion

In our attempts to understand and evaluate the claims and arguments of ancient philosophers we have to use conceptual tools, including ones not available to the philosophers themselves. Indisputably the analytical investigations in this century of the metaphysics of, say, Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle have yielded invaluable insights. But where these have involved enquiries concerning the verb 'to be' they have tended to use what may be an inappropriate framework – that of certain modern distinctions in the verb 'to be'. In particular, commentators have been misled by the English word 'exist', which now has the role of the more-or-less defunct complete 'is' (as in 'To be or not to be'); they have assumed that Greek *esti*, when complete, like 'exist', does not allow a completion, and has a role sharply distinct from the *esti* in a predication. I have argued that a different picture emerges from Plato and Aristotle, both from their usage of *esti* and from their explicit discussions. Even where they do draw attention to the two syntactic uses (complete and incomplete), as Plato perhaps does at *Sophist* 255c12–d7, and Aristotle in the passages cited in section V, they should not be described as elucidating a difference between the 'is' of existence and that of predication, or indeed as noting a difference of any great philosophical importance. When we try to understand the arguments which seem to depend crucially on the verb 'to be' we should beware of seeking to impose or to discern our currently favoured distinctions, for in ancient Greek the conceptual web was woven differently, and in the case of the verb 'to be' it was, comparatively speaking, a seamless one.[14]

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[13] This view seems now to be fairly widely shared, though with variants. See Dancy [301], 65: 'The existential "is" is paradeigmatically a by-virtue-of-itself "is" [sc. a *kath'hauto*, essential 'is'], but the latter is in the first instance a predicative "is" and only becomes existential by cancellation of the predicate.'

[14] I am grateful to the editor, Stephen Everson, and to Gail Fine – who disagrees with many of my conclusions – for helpful comments and criticisms.

Bibliography

This bibliography is intended to provide a starting-point for further reading. It includes, in addition to the works cited in the essays, other books and articles which will be of use in exploring ancient views on language. It is by no means comprehensive, but the principles of discrimination were not such that inclusion should be taken to imply recommendation. Further reading on other aspects of Greek thought can be found in the bibliographies to the earlier volumes in this series, [13] and [14].

General

The fullest introduction in English to Greek philosophy until Aristotle is W. K. C. Guthrie's *A History of Greek Philosophy*:
[1] *The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans* (Cambridge, 1962)
[2] *The Presocratic Tradition from Parmenides to Democritus* (Cambridge, 1965)
[3] *The Fifth-Century Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1969)
[4] *Plato: The Man and his Dialogues: Earlier Period* (Cambridge, 1975)
[5] *The Later Plato and the Academy* (Cambridge, 1978)
[6] *Aristotle: An Encounter* (Cambridge, 1981).

An admirably informative and brief history of classical thought is
[7] T. H. Irwin, *Classical Thought* (Oxford, 1989).

The following contain articles about various periods and aspects of ancient philosophy:
[8] J. P. Anton and G. L. Kustas (edd.), *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Albany, 1971)
[9] J. P. Anton and A. Preus (edd.), *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, vol. 2 (Albany, 1983)
[10] R. Bambrough (ed.), *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (London, 1965)
[11] M. F. Burnyeat, *The Skeptical Tradition* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1983)
[12] H. Cherniss, *Collected Papers* (Leiden, 1977)
[13] S. Everson (ed.), *Epistemology* (Cambridge, 1990)
[14] S. Everson (ed.), *Psychology* (Cambridge, 1991)