The Study of Being in Plato and Aristotle

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Usage of the Greek verb 'to be' (*einai*) is generally discussed in reference to three broad categories: the predicative use, the existential and the veridical – that is, it can be used to say that something *is such-and-such*, that something *exists* or that something *is the case* – and these categories, or modifications thereof, have played a formative role in the way we understand Being in ancient Greek philosophy.[1] This is clearly a very natural way to proceed, but nevertheless in this article I make three suggestions which tell against this linguistic approach. Namely, (1) Being cannot be reduced to predication, (2) Being is conceived as a unified concept, rather than one with a range of fundamentally distinct senses, and (3) Being is, above all, a content-rich concept that enjoys a privileged status in Greek philosophical thought. What emerges from my discussion is that in the hands of Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle 'being' refers to the ultimate reality, the deepest level of truth. *That which is* is at once a cosmic principle and a principle of intelligibility. Although related to our twin ideas of existence and truth, it betrays a rather different set of assump-

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[1] I capitalise 'being' wherever it is used as a noun. This helps avoid ambiguity in my English and marks out Being as something exceptional.

tions about nature and knowledge. I do not, however, attempt to develop this concept of Being here (though I hope to in the future).

I appreciate that the linguistic approach I am criticising has a lot of currency in the scholarship and I must admit a fair amount of trepidation in swimming against the tide.[2] Worse still, I engage with a broad range of complex and sophisticated texts but give them an only cursory treatment. Nevertheless, I have become convinced that certain features of the ancient concept of Being risk being obscured by our language-oriented focus and I believe that the following arguments, however superficial, still succeeded in highlighting some of the limitations of that approach.

1. Being cannot be reduced to predication or the like

The view that Being can be understood in reference to some kind of predicative usage has been defended by such eminent scholars as Michael Frede and G. E. L. Owen.[3] Plato's account of not-Being in the *Sophist*, for one, has led these scholars to attribute to Plato the view that Being fundamentally involves *being something*. Here Being is concerned with statements and it provides the link between some subject and its predicate (or the like). Frede (1992: 409), for example, can claim that in the *Sophist* "being for Plato is always a matter of being something or other" and similarly for Owen (1971: 235) when we ascribe some portion of Being to something, we are saying "that it 'is' so-and-so."[4] Such an approach has an obvious appeal. In the relevant passages of the *Sophist* the Eleatic Stranger is expressly concerned with understanding false *statements*. Moreover, when we turn to not-being, the locution 'is not' certainly seems to have something in common with negative predication: it is equated with the Different and, as the Stranger says, something must be different *to something* (255c8–d8). In syntactic terms we may say that this

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[2] Fronterotta (2011: 35–39) provides a useful overview of the recent scholarship here. As he remarks, the tendency has been to reject or play down the 'complete' or 'existential' use of the verb 'to be.' Fronterotta joins his voice to O'Brien in arguing against this trend. My own view is broadly compatible: I think the complete use of *esti* can be used to evoke Being in its pregnant philosophical sense and I do not think that Being is predication.

[3] The case of Charles Kahn is more complicated. He looks to linguistic usage and seizes on predication as foundational (see e.g. Kahn 2009a: 24–25), yet he stresses that the predicative *esti* is very pliable and that the Greeks were not sensitive to our distinction between existence and predication. At a semantic level Kahn argues that the veridical sense is basic, especially in philosophical usages; but this, in turn, is tied to the predicative construction: "for every fact, every case of being-so, can be formulated by a predicative usage of 'to be'" (Kahn 2009a: 24–25). Even where a *fact* is being asserted rather than a statement, "there is a one-to-one correspondence between what is the case and the truth or statement that it is the case" (Kahn 2009a: 25). Ultimately Kahn attributes to Plato and Aristotle the view that "the structure of reality is such to be truly expressed in discourse" (Kahn 2009a: 26, cf. 36). I tend to disagree. For Plato and Aristotle discursive knowledge relies on non-discursive principles (like the Good or the prime mover).

[4] Some have argued against a predicative reading of the *Sophist*, e.g. Prior (1980), Heinaman (1983), Fronterotta (2011) and O'Brien (2013). Note that Being of the *Sophist* need not be equated with the verb 'to be.' Most instances of '...is...' will not refer to the form of Being (except incidentally): 'Socrates is tall' means that Socrates shares in the form Tallness; 'Socrates is not beautiful' means that Socrates shares in the form Difference in respect of Beauty, and so on. The things mentioned in these sentences *do*, of course, share in Being, but this is because everything whatsoever shares in Being.

'is not' is *incomplete*, it cannot be used absolutely. We can say 'x is not F,' but we cannot say 'x simply is not.' And yet this characterisation (that Being always involves being *something*) has a rather substantial problem to overcome. The quintessential Beings for Plato are the forms. Whatever it might mean, the forms *are* in some deeply significant way. And although they can happily fit into the predicate position of a sentence (the 'p' in *s is p*), nevertheless, insofar as they are Beings – *things that are* – they make far more sense as subjects than they do as predicates. This, I would urge, is not a trifling quibble, but an observation that speaks to the very essence of what a Being is for Plato. These items enjoy a special independence (χωρίς). They alone are what they are *themselves by themselves*, αὐτὰ καθ᾽ αὐτά.[5] One of the key features of forms is that they are ontologically basic. Predicates, by contrast, enjoy no such pedigree. On the contrary, they are parasitic on their grammatical subjects. Though we do find forms in the position of a predicate (as in the tallness in Simmias), this is not their native habitat. To subject forms to this kind of dependence would vitiate their very reason for being. Forms are independent, predicates are not.

A broadly analogous idea is evident in Aristotle. And this is all the more striking because he not only reflects on various uses of the verb *einai*, but he clearly possesses the linguistic resources to identify predication (say, κατηγορία or τό τι κατά τινος λέγεσθαι).[6] Consider, then, Aristotle's treatment in the *Categories*. In this text he distinguishes *ousia* (often translated as 'substance') from the various qualifications that can modify it, such as how large it is, how it is placed and so on. But again, the most likely candidate for Being here is not a predicate; Being must be *ousia*, and this is the one thing that can operate outside of the '....is....' relationship. As with Plato, this independence is one of the quintessential features of *ousia* (especially primary *ousia*, which is the purest expression of *ousia*).[7] In this context Being will refer to the *subject* of which a predicate may be predicated. If we say that *Socrates is pale*, it is *Socrates* that counts as a Being here (*Cat.* 2a11–19). "From primary substance," Aristotle says, "there is no predicate [κατηγορία], since it is never said of an underlying subject" (*Cat.* 3a36–7).[8] *Ousia* is prior to, and independent of, any putative predication. This seems to rule out the possibility that Beings (as such) should be essentially understood as predicates.[9]

It is above all in the *Metaphysics* where we see that Aristotle cannot have thought of Being as something quintessentially exemplified by predication. This text (or collection

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[5] Owen (1971: 256) famously argued that things said to be *themselves by themselves* are things that are said to be identical to themselves in an identity statement. Frede (1992: 400–401) relies on a similar idea. I would put it the other way round: the Being of forms allows them to fit into these identify statements but is not reducible to such linguistic criteria. See further Fronterotta (2011: 45–47).

[6] Aristotle notes that Being is said in many ways at, e.g., *Metaph.* 1026a33–b4 and 1051a34–b6. See Kung (1986). At, e.g., *Int.* 16b22–5 he appears to employ the phrase τὸ εἶναι ἢ μὴ εἶναι in a predicative sense whereby to say that something *is* or *is not* means nothing by itself.

[7] Cf. Reeve (2000: 10): "Separation is the hallmark of Aristotle's substance".

[8] Cf. Arist. *Metaph.* 1028b36–1029a2. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

[9] Perhaps it will be objected that this refers to *ousia* and not Being. Yet the two cannot be too far removed. Plato is happy to use *ousia* in the sense of Being at times (e.g. *Phd.* 78d1, *Tht.* 185c9, *Sph.* 248c2, *Prm.* 142b6, *Ti.*

of texts) expressly concerns Being and looks to isolate Being in its purest form. It wonders if Being *qua* Being is form or a 'this' (τόδε τι). Such a question would be strange if Aristotle were trying to isolate predication, especially in regard to the idea that Being might be a *tode ti* with its demonstrative force; predicates and concrete particulars seem like very different things. Though it may be the case that *form* might overlap with *predicate* in some sense, this leads back the problem already mentioned, namely that this Being enjoys a special independence.[10]

We shall return to the claim that Being is not predication again in what follows, but for now let me simply reiterate my first suggestion. Although the ancients certainly *use* the verb 'to be' in predicative or identity statements, this usage is not what informs their concept of Being. As always in ancient philosophy we should be careful not to let our own interests and preoccupations obscured the nature of the ancient texts. And this takes us to the second suggestion.

2. Being is a unified concept and we should be wary of fragmenting it

Presumably we should try to avoid wherever possible the view that Being represents a half-cooked attempt to elucidate our modern concepts and distinctions. Certainly our sources tend to give the impression that Being in its pregnant philosophical sense is a unified concept. Aristotle is instructive here. He explicitly acknowledges an ambiguity in the thing, but insists on a paradigmatic, primary sense, namely substantial Being (*Metaph.* 1003a33–b10, 1028a31–b2). This is what underwrites the project of the *Metaphysics*. The unity of Being is in fact hard to deny and an increasing number of scholars have tried to accommodate this via the rather difficult contention that *esti* has a univocal sense. Thus, Frede has argued against the view that Plato is attempting to differentiate two senses of *esti* in the *Sophist* and others besides have taken up comparable views.[11] Simi-

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29c3, *R.* 525b5 and *Phdr.* 247c7). And for Aristotle in both the *Categories* and the *Metaphysics* the *ousia* tells us *what something is*; cf. *Cat.* 2b32 with Ackrill (1963: 79–80) and *Metaph.* 1028a13–18. This is understandable given the clear etymological connection between *einai* and *ousia*, the latter being something like *being-ness*.

[10] Cf. Witt (1989: 121–126). She argues that a form or essence cannot be the *property* of a substance because the form is the *cause* of a substance and hence the form is prior to the substance, while a property *qua* property has the substance as its cause, so it would be posterior to the substance.

[11] Frede (1992: 401–421); see also Owen (1971: 257–258), Prior (1980: 205–206) and esp. Kahn (2009a: 19). That Plato is committed to a univocal sense of *esti* is controversial however. See Brown (2008: 440–441). Matthen (1983: 124) proffered the view that predicative statements can be converted into existential and *vice versa* (e.g. 'the man is running' = 'the running man is'). Brown subsequently popularised a comparable idea that there might be continuity between some existential and predicative statements (much as 'Jane teaches' and 'Jane teaches French' do not require different senses of 'teach'). O'Brien (2013: 225), however, disagrees. He emphasises the primacy of existence for Plato and goes on to argue that we need to take 'is' in two different senses to understand how what-is-not *is* in, e.g., the *Sophist* (237). I'm inclined to agree with O'Brien that Being can be evoked by the complete use of *esti* (Change *is*) – but my contention is that Plato is not primarily concerned to investigate Being via analysis of what it means to say that something is. Indeed, this or that use of *esti* can be quite incidentally to an assertion about Being: 'Change is' (ἡ κίνησίς ἐστι) can be rephrased as 'Change is a Being' (ἡ κίνησίς ἐστιν ὄν) or 'Change participates in Being' (ἡ κίνησις μέτεχει τοῦ ὄντος). Cf. Fronterotta (2011: 51): "Plato certainly

larly, a shift in approach is evident in the scholarship on Parmenides' Being. While an earlier generation of scholars were inclined to accuse Parmenides of confusion between the existential and the predicative sense of *esti*, this has subsequently by replaced with more charitable readings. A popular interpretation of Parmenides understands his use of *esti* (etc.) as primarily veridical but fused with an existential sense.[12] But for all that, the more pressing issue is not that Plato, Aristotle or Parmenides treat the verb *einai* as univocal, but that when they are thinking about Being in its philosophical sense, they tend to assume that it is a discrete, homogenous thing. Indeed, my contention is that we fail to appreciate the fundamental unity of Being by viewing it through a linguistic lens. Although veracity and especially existence can make for a useful point of departure, the ancient concept of Being is different from either of these or their conjunction. To illustrate this point we will briefly glance over the Being of Parmenides before moving on to Plato and Aristotle. It is beyond my scope or ability to show definitively that the Parmenidean One does not fit neatly into these categories, but I believe a strong case can be made for the plausibility of my reading.

To this end let us begin with the reception of Parmenides by other ancient philosophers. The ancients are generally unconcerned with some of the issues that occupy modern commentators, like the subject or sense of *esti*. Moreover, they tend to interpret the Parmenidean Being in a cosmological vein, often as a concrete, extended entity.[13] It is common to find Parmenides referred to as a natural philosopher like, say, Empedocles.[14] Theophrastus says that according to Parmenides "the whole is one, ungenerated, and spherical in shape."[15] Or consider Zeno's paradoxes of motion which attempt to show, in support of Parmenides, that distances are neither dense nor discrete. Surely Zeno is assuming that the Parmenidean One is extended, as Aristotle notes (*Metaph.* 1001b7–10).[16] Indeed, this seems to be implicit in the fabled 'problem of change' which Parmenides bequeathed to Greek philosophy. That is, his abstract speculations were taken to show that the physical realm is unchanging. However much this cosmological reading of the

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distinguishes among various sense of the verb 'to be' [...] but, contrary to what Ackrill, Frede and Owen claim, I do not think he gives of this distinction a theoretically coherent exposition or definition, since he simply makes use of it to develop his argument."

[12] Mourelatos (1979) summarises some trends in the scholarship. See more recently, Fronterotta (2007: 16–17) and Graham (2006: 157–158). Graham opts for an existential reading. An existential-predicative reading is employed by Kirk, Raven and Schofield (1983: 245–246), though they insist that Parmenides is not simply confused. And Mourelatos (1979) and Curd (1998) argue for predicative interpretations. Such readings struggle to account for the prohibition against not-being adequately since they must claim that 'not being something' (in some sense) is unthinkable.

[13] Aristotle's *Ph.* 1.2–3 launches a critique of Parmenides that turns on Parmenides' failure to realise that Being is said in many ways. Nevertheless, Aristotle still assumes that Parmenides' account of Being was an account of nature (cf. *Cael.* 298b14–24). See further Charlton (1992: 55–57) and Angioni (2021).

[14] See, e.g., fragments DK 28 A 2, A 4, A 10, A 23.

[15] Fragment DK 28 A 7. See also DK 28 A 31. The idea that Being is a sphere has rankled with modern scholars like Owen (1960: 95–101) and McKirahan (2008: 210–214). Kirk, Raven and Schofield (1983: 254, n.1) are more circumspect.

[16] Curd (1998: 172) has challenged this otherwise traditional interpretation of Zeno.

'Way of Truth' in Parmenides' poem may jar, it is not so hard to see where the ancients get it from. The whole drift of fragment B 8 has an air of corporeality to it. Being is said to be ungenerated and unperishing, indivisible and all evenly alike, it remains fixed and unmoving, perfectly well rounded. In a sense Parmenides' approach seems almost typically of Presocratic philosophy; namely, broad reflections about the shape and situation of the cosmos.[17]

And yet, against this it is little wonder that modern scholars might prefer a more epistemological or conceptual reading. Not only does Parmenides seem to reject the senses in favour of the mind (DK 28 B 4, B 7, B 8.8–9), but this is borne out by the fact that he employs abstract argumentation. And we can throw into the bargain that Parmenides attributes to his Being just those qualities that Aristotle and especially Plato would associate with the incorporeal: it is eternal and unchanging. Perhaps most importantly, the goddess establishes a strong connection between what *is* and what is intelligible and, on the other hand, between what *is not* and what is unintelligible (DK 28 B 2.8, B 3, B 6.1–2, B 8.17, B 8.34–36).[18] The basic idea is that *what is not* fails to refer to anything. Thus, (a) if something is intelligible, it must exist and (b) if something does not exist, it cannot be intelligible. Although this is an attractive interpretation, I would like to suggest a modification. Namely, that the goddess actually *equates* the intelligible with what *is*. In other words, *only* that which can be known is real and that which is unintelligible has no place in the cosmos.[19] This allows us to add another condition: (c) if something exists, it can be known; which is to say, if something cannot be known, it cannot exist. We, by contrast, do not think that existence is co-extensive with what is intelligible. We tend to think that something could exist and still be unintelligible. Or in the very least, it does not seem that intelligibility is a necessary property of what exist as such. That is, unintelligibility is not sufficient to establish that something does not exist.

As mentioned I do not intend to develop or defend this view. I merely wish to show that it is a plausible interpretation and, in particular, that it goes with the grain of contemporary ancient philosophy. Certainly this reading falls out the text readily enough. As we

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[17] Cf. Kahn (2009c: 147–148). The following remarks from Graham (2006: 153) are apposite here: "much of the discussion of Parmenides' theory has taken place in a historical vacuum in which questions of motivation have simply been ignored. This vacuum was created by the assumptions of analytic philosophy that Parmenides was addressing timeless philosophical issues in a timeless way. The article that is perhaps most responsible for this reading (Owen 1960), encourages us to put aside historical for purely philosophical concerns." Cf. similarly Curd (1998: 26–27).

[18] The poem addresses not only what cannot be *thought*, but also what cannot be *said* (λέγειν in DK 28 B 6.2, ἀνώνυμος in B 8.17); and in the *Sophist* too reference is made to what cannot be uttered (e.g. *Sph.* 238c8–10). There is, however, nothing to prevent us saying the words 'not-being' or the like. The sense required is comparable to *knowing* or *understanding* whereby the action successfully gains its object. I believe *intelligibility* conveys the basic idea.

[19] For the view that *what is* and *what can be known* coincide cf. Kahn (2009c: 163–166). Curd (2015: 7) argues that "there is an isomorphism between what-is and genuine thought" and posits "an unbreakable connection between thinking/understanding and what-is" (Curd 2015: 8); and Gerson (2006) argues that real Being in the *Sophist* is in fact Intellect (*nous*). It is noteworthy that in Plato and Aristotle *knowing* is considered a natural function of humans – indeed, it is our highest function.

saw, the goddess explicitly links knowing and Being, or what is known and what *is*, in B 8.34–6 and B 3 (τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἔστιν τε καὶ εἶναι),[20] where we might allow for the idea that something can exist and not necessarily be intelligible. On this view the key problem with not-being is not merely that it fails to refer. Rather, the negation of Being is intrinsically unintelligible (because it claims that what *is* is not), and since it is unintelligible it cannot exist. To deny Being would mean not only that there is no Being to be discovered, but that there is nothing truly intelligible – for Being simply is the intelligible. But how can one intelligibly assert that there is nothing intelligible? This is nonsense. There would be no destination nor a path – nothing. In fact, this is just the kind of inference the Eleatic Stranger seems to make in the *Sophist*: not-being (*qua* the contrary of Being) is rejected because it is impossible to articulate or conceive without contradiction (*Sph.* 238c9–239a11). To say that the what-is-not (*qua* contrary of Being) *is* is incoherent and what is incoherent cannot be. In this way it becomes quite easy to understand how Parmenides could be led to his extreme rejection of change and plurality: if it is only the intelligible that exists, then by problematising generation – *for where does it come from? and what got it started?* – he shows that it has no place in the cosmos.[21] Similarly, we can appreciate how Parmenides' abstract argumentation leads to a cosmological conclusion.

But for our purposes, the most important reason for attributing this concept of Being to Parmenides is that Plato and Aristotle seem to have inherited just such a view. They all but take for granted that the epistemological first principles coincide with the metaphysical first principles; and these special first principles are identified in terms of 'being.' Plato's Beings, the forms, are ontologically more basic than physical things, which are but a shadow of the forms; they are also quintessentially intelligible. This is not to say they are easy to know – on the contrary[22] – but they ground knowledge in a way that perceptible things simply cannot. Accordingly, what can be known and what truly exists are the same, and these special items are readily brought to mind as *Beings*. The following distinction in the *Timaeus* (*Ti.* 27d6–28a1) is representative here:

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[20] There is an issue here of how Parmenides is equating thought and Being: does the goddess mean 'knowing and Being are the same' or 'the same thing can be known as can be'? Martin (2016: 128–147) has a thorough discussion of the scholarship which aims to establish the Neoplatonic view that Being for Parmenides was intelligent. I am not unsympathetic to this idea. O'Brien (2000: 21–24) opens the appealing possibility that we take τὸ αὐτὸ ('the same thing') as the *object* of νοεῖν and the *subject* of εἶναι. Essential for my view is the idea that the mind has a kinship with Being (which is not to say that it is mind-dependent). See Fronterotta (2007: 6–7) and the previous note.

[21] Cf. Lear (1988: 58): "It is because Parmenides thinks change incomprehensible that he dismisses its reality. He believes himself entitled to move from the *unthinkability* of change to its *unreality*." Consider also in this connection Curd (1998) 28: "The problem is that the premise that rejects the route of what-is-not is, on the face of it, woefully unsupported. B2.7–8 asserts that what-is-not can be neither known nor pointed out.... But there is no support offered for this assertion". The interpretation I am developing makes excellent sense of Parmenides' argument (or lack thereof).

[22] The purest objects of knowledge are in fact the hardest to know or the last to be discovered for both Plato and Aristotle. See, for example, Arist. *Metaph.* 982a21–24, *APo.* 71b33–72a5; Pl. *Smp.* 210 and *R.* 517b8–c5.

What is it that always is but has no becoming and what, always becoming, never is? The first is grasped by the mind through reason, always remaining the same; the other, comes by opinion through the unreasoning senses, becoming and perishing, but never really being.

τί τὸ ὂν ἀεί, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἔχον, καὶ τί τὸ γιγνόμενον μὲν ἀεί, ὂν δὲ οὐδέποτε; τὸ μὲν δὴ νοήσει μετὰ λόγου περιληπτόν, ἀεὶ κατὰ ταὐτὰ ὄν, τὸ δ᾿ αὖ δόξῃ μετ᾿ αἰσθήσεως ἀλόγου δοξαστόν, γιγνόμενον καὶ ἀπολλύμενον, ὄντως δὲ οὐδέποτε ὄν.

That which *is* possesses a permanence and immutability which renders it, and only it, apt for knowledge. Here, then, only the intelligible *is*, and only that which (truly) *is* is intelligible. The epistemic and the ontological aspects of Being are two sides of a single, homogenous thing.

For Aristotle, the quest for Being *qua* Being amounts to the quest for the first principle of knowledge. In A2 of the *Metaphysics*, for instance, Aristotle makes some programmatic remarks about the inquiry into Being. The wise man will know the causes and first principles that ground all scientific knowledge, *epistēmē*. "And what is most scientifically knowable of all [μάλιστα δ᾿ ἐπιστητά] are the primary things and causes, since it is through these and proceeding from these that we know the other things, not these because of the ones that fall under them" (*Metaph.* 982b2–6, Reeve's translation). Even without going into detail here, it is apparent that intelligibility is closely allied with objects of a special ontological status—and it is this idea, I propose, that underlies Parmenides' Being. In the very least I hope to have indicated how appropriate it would be for Parmenides to identify the fundamental ontological component with the primary object of knowledge; that is, to posit a perfect coincidence between what the mind can grasp and reality.

Though (quite understandably) Plato and Aristotle are not led to the same extremes as Parmenides, they still appeal to a very particular understanding of Being. Moreover, it is one that does not fit neatly into the familiar linguistic distinctions between existence, veracity or predication. The most useful of these is the existential usage. It is sufficiently clear that *esti* used absolutely (without a complement) can readily be employed to refer to Being and this is often most easily translated with 'exists.' Thus 'Beauty *is*' might be glossed as 'Beauty exists.' And yet we cannot simply equate Being with existence. For consider Plato's forms. While they surely 'exist' in some sense of the term, this is an 'existence' which does not really apply to concrete things. But how can tables and chairs not exist? This is not the existence we are familiar with.[23] And again, it is apparently self-

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[23]　This, of course, is not infrequently remarked. Moss (2019: 77) notes that "Plato often uses 'what is' or 'being' to refer to an ontologically superior subclass of all the things that there are in the ordinary sense." Vlastos (1965–1966: 7–11) distinguishes two senses of 'not real' viz. *non-existence* and *not genuine*. Inasmuch as only the latter seems to permit of degrees (i.e. something can be more genuine, but it cannot exist more), Vlastos argues that Plato must have had this sense in mind, at least in the many places where he intimates that things are more or

evident that numbers 'exist' (*Sph.* 238a10–b1) which does not seem to square with our ideas of existence. Finally, as mentioned this 'existence' has a central epistemological function that almost entirely absent in our concept. Nevertheless, let me reiterate that *existence* is not completely incongruous with Being. A key feature of the forms is that they are permanent, enduring and unchanging; it is almost as though they are more concrete than concrete things. Moreover, as just mentioned, 'existence' can be employed as a kind of placeholder when talking about Being. In this way, *existence* is a useful but limited way of approaching Being.

Turning to the veridical sense, we can begin by noting that the quarry of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* – Being *qua* Being – is the metaphysical primary. It is not existence *per se*, nor is it truth *per se*, but the fount of scientific knowledge. And this should make us wary of the veridical understanding of Being. Being is not to be identified via uses of *esti* that might be translated by 'is true.' If Being simply referred to *what is true*, it would not focus so keenly on these privileged metaphysical entities. That is to say, *what is the case* is a broader category than *what is*. The account of Being we have just surveyed is much more pointed than simply designating those states of affairs that happen to pertain or those statements that happen to be true. The disparate facts of the manifest work cannot be identified with Being in the pregnant philosophical sense of the term (though the two may be related). Nevertheless, insofar as Being is the epistemic principle it is clear that veracity has a crucial role to play here. But let me reiterate that Being should be understood as a discrete, unified concept. Its ontological primacy and intelligibility (its 'existence' and its 'veracity') are inextricably linked. Parmenides is particularly emphatic on the unity and cohesion of Being.

Lastly, the ancient concept of Being is really not of a piece with predication. Rather than anything formal or semantic, it is a content-rich, pregnant concept endowed with significant intrinsic value. And this leads us to my third and final suggestion.

3. Being is something privileged and pre-eminent

This may have been evident in the previous section, however I wish to isolate and emphasise it here. The idea that Being is something privileged with a special ontological and epistemological status often appears in our texts – frequently without argument or explanation. It is clearly evident in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, if not Parmenides' poem, but it is most conspicuous in Plato. Since we have already discussed the *Sophist* and since

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less real (as in *R.* 579a where the form of the bed is said to be more real than a bed). Malcolm (1967: 131–139) in discussing Plato's usage in the *Sophist*, similarly distinguishes *being real* from *existence*. Cornford (1935: 202–252) divines a three-tiered ontology at work in the *Sophist*: namely, real beings, images, and the totally unreal, as per the image of the line in the *Republic*.

this text is often thought to contain a predicative account of Being, let us begin with an example from there.

At *Sophist* 242c4-6 we read that earlier philosophers have been too lax in their approach to the questions of how many Beings there are and what kind they are (πόσα τε καὶ ποῖά ἐστιν). From there, having explicitly thematised the question of what τὸ ὄν refers to (243c10–e2), the subsequent examples clearly treat Beings as ontological primaries (242d–e). We are told that some say there are only two Beings, others three; some say they mingle, others say they clash; some say they are the hot and the cold and so on. Here 'being' refers to the fundamental constituents of the cosmos. Thus we encounter the 'friends of the forms,' who reject materialism and limit Being to the incorporeal forms (246b6–c3). This usage of 'being' tells against the predicative reading, nor is it the only such passage. Indeed, at a culminating point in the discussion with the friends of the forms we read quite explicitly that Being is a living, thinking entity! Theaetetus is incredulous at the mere supposition that 'complete Being' (τὸ παντελῶς ὄν) lacks life, soul or mind.[24]

At *Metaphysics* 1002a8–14 Aristotle broaches the issue of whether body should be regarded as a substance or if perhaps it is surface, line, unit and point that should be substances. Earlier thinkers, he notes, considered body to be the substance and Being (τὴν οὐσίαν καὶ τὸ ὄν ᾤοντο τὸ σῶμα εἶναι), but since it seems that body is defined by surface, line etc., and since it cannot exist without them, certain wiser thinkers came to believe the inverse. And he goes on, if these are not substances then nothing is, because the accidents of these are *not worthy of the name* (οὐ γὰρ δὴ τά γε συμβεβηκότα τούτοις ἄξιον ὄντα καλεῖν). Here too Aristotle is talking about what is ontologically basic.

For better or worse Aristotle has no qualms describing earlier philosophies in reference to this conception of Being – much like Plato (cf. *Sph.* 242c4–243b10). Perhaps the most memorable passage in this vein is in the opening chapter of *Metaphysics* Z. Aristotle foregrounds the question of Being or *ousia* as the question of what is primary. He continues,

> Indeed the question that was asked long ago, is now, and always will be asked, and is always giving rise to puzzles – namely, What is being? – is just the question, What is substance? (For this is what some people say is one, others more than one, some that it is a limited number, others an unlimited one.) And that is why we too must most of all, primarily, and (one might

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[24] See Pl. *Sph.* 248e6–249a10. Theaetetus calls it a δεινὸν λόγον (249a3) and subsequently says: Πάντα ἔμοιγε ἄλογα ταῦτ' εἶναι φαίνεται (249b1). See generally Gerson (2006).

almost say) exclusively get a theoretical grasp on what it is that is a being in this [substantial] way (*Metaph.* 1028b2–7, Reeve's translation).

It should be quite clear from this that Aristotle can use 'being' to refer to what is onto-logically primary and fundamental without further ado.

Returning to Plato, in the *Philebus* (*Phlb.* 57b5 ff.) Socrates finds himself discuss-ing which of the sciences (*epistēmai*) is most precise. Upon hearing that it is dialectic Protarchus understandably asks what this is. Socrates' answer is emphatic:

> Surely anyone could recognize which science we're talking about. The one concerned with Being and reality and what is by nature always the same in every way – I take it that anyone with a modicum of sense would consider this by far the truest knowledge. (*Phlb.* 58a1–4)

> Δῆλον ὅτι ἡ πᾶς ἂν τήν γε νῦν λεγομένην γνοίη· τὴν γὰρ περὶ τὸ ὂν καὶ τὸ ὄντως καὶ τὸ κατὰ ταὐτὸν ἀεὶ πεφυκὸς πάντως ἔγωγε οἶμαι ἡγεῖσθαι σύμπαντας ὅσοις νοῦ καὶ σμικρὸν προσήρτηται μακρῷ ἀληθεστάτην εἶναι γνῶσιν.

Comparable usages of 'being' would not be hard to multiply (*Tht.* 186c is a good one).[25] In a philosophical context the term 'being' can readily be employed, without apology or explanation, to refer to the ontological primaries. However, it does more than simply designate the fundamental cosmic stuff, it characterises it as intrinsically intelligible and the source of the intelligibility of the cosmos. What begins to emerge here is that, far from conforming to a familiar notion of existence, truth or predication, the ancient concept of Being reflects and informs a particular way of looking at and explaining the world. This is not the place to explore these ideas, but they clearly have immediate implications for epistemology and ontology. For example, if knowledge is aimed at Being this would drastically limit the *scope* of what counts as philosophical knowledge; where modern epistemologists assume that knowledge extends to quotidian beliefs like knowing that Jones has three coins in his pocket, knowledge-of-Being would constitute a deep grasp of the nature of reality.[26] At the level of ontology, the ancient concept of Being leads us

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[25] Moss (2019: 72–76) shows how Socrates simply assumes that *epistēmē* "is always of what is".

[26] Moss (2019: 77–79) recognises the ontological primacy of Being (which she calls "Robust Being") and connects this up with its role in epistemology. She notes also (2019: 80–81) that it speaks to what is *real* or meta-physically privileged. Von Fritz discusses how νόος and νοεῖν in Homer might refer to recognizing something for what it is (like recognizing an old woman as a goddess) and makes the following remark: "While [...] νοεῖν is always distinguished from purely sensual perception, it is not conceived of as the result of a process of reasoning, much less as this process itself, but rather as a kind of mental perception, if this expression is allowable. In other words, it may, in some way, appear as a kind of sixth sense which penetrates deeper into the nature of the objects perceived then the other senses. This connotation of the term was to become of great importance in early Greek philosophy" (Von Fritz 1943: 90). Cf. von Fritz (1945; e.g. 241). Gerson (2006) makes the provocative suggestion that the really real, the forms, are in fact divine intellect.

to expect a kind of hierarchy in nature, some items being intrinsically superior to others, and Being itself at the very apex.[27]

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

I have no doubt that the various uses of *einai* are as the commentators say they are, but for all that, I find it very hard to fully account for Being with the limited tools provided by 'what is the case' or 'what exists.' And even more so, I struggle to make sense of certain passages with a predicative reading. To speak generally, when we broach philosophical issues – like *What is truth? What does it mean to be an individual?* and so on – we do so with some inchoate understanding of the sort of thing we are grasping after. What I have tried to show in this paper is that the questions surrounding Being are not borne of reflection on language. On the contrary, when the term 'being' is employed in its pregnant philosophical sense it refers to the highest of highs, the philosopher's holy grail, that which fundamentally grounds reality and knowledge thereof. As can readily be observed from the textual evidence, writers like Plato, Aristotle and Parmenides felt very comfortable appealing to a basic conception of Being that enjoyed a special independence (unlike a predicate), that possessed a fundamental oneness and that was content-rich (again, unlike a predicate).

If it seems incredibly that these authors could be so blithe and unconcerned about usages of *esti*, we must remember how easy it is to lose sight of the tools we use even when we are employing them. From the age of infants we navigate highly complex social mores, yet in many cases we do so without any explicit knowledge of the sociology or psychology behind them; native speakers can and do deploy their language in highly complex ways without ever reflecting deeply on its structure (for example, most would not know the difference between 'I' and 'me' at an explicit level). The ancients, of course, were not utterly unconcerned with how their language worked – as we see from the *Cratylus* or from Prodicus – but this is a far cry from our 'linguistically-turned' philosophy.

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[27] Koyré (1957) documents how this value-laden conception of the world was replaced by a modern 'mathematical' concept. Reeve (2000: 291–293) discusses how modern philosophy no longer couples ontological and epistemological primaries (to its own peril). Lear (1988: 273) asserts that two thoughts permeate Aristotle's view of the world: firstly, that it is ultimately intelligible and, secondly, that reality forms a hierarchy. Vlastos (1965–1966: 13–15) notes the incomparable value Plato places on knowing the forms: "Thus in one and the same experience Plato finds happiness, beauty, knowledge, moral sustenance and regeneration, and a mythical sense of kinship with eternal perfection" (1965–1966: 15).

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The Study of Being in Plato and Aristotle

Usage of the Greek verb 'to be' is generally divided into three broad cate-
gories—the predicative use, the existential and the veridical—and these
usages often inform the way we understand Being in ancient philoso-
phy. This article challenges this approach by arguing that Being is not
the product of linguistic reflection in Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle;
rather, these thinkers treat Being as the ontological and epistemological
primary. Though this may overlap with the linguistic senses, it is not the
same thing. The article is divided into three sections: the first one raises
several basic issues with the predicative interpretation of Being, the
second argues that Being is unified and singular in a significant sense
and the third brings out the special pre-immanence of Being.