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Essays on Being

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Preview

Essays on Being is a collection of eight essays published by Charles Kahn in different journals over a period of 38 years (1966-2004). The collection compresses Kahn's extensive research on the Greek verb 'to be', complements his book *The Verb 'Be' in Ancient Greek* (1973), and bears witness to the intellectual earnestness that drives him to amend and modify his own views.

Two pivotal topics are present through these essays: a criticism of the distinction between the copula and the existential use of the Greek verb 'to be' ('einai'), and an account of how the concept of being became the central topic of philosophy from Parmenides to Aristotle. In Kahn's view, the distinction between copula and existential uses of the verb 'einai' is linguistically as well as philosophically misleading and he intends to substitute for it a distinction between the syntactic roles of the verb as copula construction and semantic marker of instantiation. The verb 'einai', according to Kahn, is basically a verb of predication that in full copula construction ascribes or denies a predicate (e.g. 'Socrates is wise'), but in incomplete or absolute construction simply posits a subject for predication (e.g. 'Socrates is'). The idea is that 'einai' in full construction not only ascribes or denies a predicate, but also implicitly assumes that the subject of that predicate obtains, and when the verb is used without a predicate in incomplete or absolute construction the positing of the subject is reinforced.

The essays can be divided into two groups: Chapters (1-3), having a linguistic philological character, focus on the etymology of 'einai', its semantic history in ancient literary and philosophical Greek, and the history of the verb and the notion of 'being' in hellenistic, medieval and modern philosophy. The purpose of these essays is to show that the distinction copula-existential not only does not apply to 'einai' but also is historically and philosophically misleading. Existence is not even a distinct concept in Greek philosophy and the semantics and syntax of 'einai' are remarkably different from those of its modern counterparts. The second group (4, 6-8) is of a historical-philosophical character and proposes to prove the inapplicability of the distinction between the copula and the existential use of 'to be' to ancient philosophical texts. Here Kahn focuses on particular passages and shows how the above distinction

misrepresents and obscures the philosophical arguments and doctrines of Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle. Chapter 5 returns to the issues handled in chapters 1-3 to give an improved account of the semantics and syntax of ‘einai’.

Kahn begins chapter 1 (‘The Greek Verb ‘To Be’ and the Concept of Being’) assuming that all thinking is conditioned to some extent by the language in which it is formulated, and that a paramount difference between ‘einai’ and ‘to be’ is that ‘einai’ was regarded and used by the Greeks as having an absolute and a predicative construction, while ‘to be’ is normally understood and used by us as either meaning ‘to exist’ or as indicating a copula construction. Since ‘einai’ is to be analyzed in syntactic terms and ‘to be’ in semantic ones, it is obvious that there is no correlation between these two verbs. As a matter of fact, ‘einai’ in absolute construction need not mean exist and Greek non-verbal predicates do not necessarily require the verb. A good example is found in Plato’s *Theaetetus* (151E-152á, where Plato’s exegesis of Protagoras’ motto—”as things appear to me, so they are to me” (οἷα ἐμοὶ φαίνεται, τοιαῦτα ἔστι ἐμοί)—is only intelligible if the absolute ‘einai’ is understood as an affirmation of fact, i.e. ‘to be so’, ‘to be the case’, ‘to be true’. The same use of the verb can be appreciated in Parmenides’ path of truth conviction and knowledge, which is in fact the path of ‘what is’, i.e. ‘what is the case’. The absolute use of ‘einai’ affirms what is the case and/or what is true, two sides of the same token, for something is true if it is the case. This is precisely what Aristotle recognizes as the strictest use of ‘einai’ (*Metaphysics* 1051b1), as well as one of the oldest idiomatic uses of the verb in Greek and Indo-European (e.g. τῷ ὄντι, ‘really’, ‘truly’; ἔστι ταῦτα, ‘these things are so’).

Where does the notion of existence associated to the verb ‘to be’ come from? That is the topic of chapter 2 (‘On the Terminology for *Copula* and *Existence*’), which is intended as a preliminary approach to the question. Leaving the Arabic tradition and its influence on Latin authors aside, and supposing that the technical use and notion of the copula may have been established twice, first in the Arabic tradition and independently in the Latin tradition, Kahn tracks the copula to Abelard’s interpretation of Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione* 21a25. In that work Aristotle introduces the distinction between *accidental* predication and *per se* predication in order to explain why ‘Homer is’ does not follow from ‘Homer is a poet’. In ‘Homer is a poet’ ‘is’ (i.e. ‘esti’ third person singular of ‘einai’) is predicated of Homer *accidentally*, only insofar as he is a poet, whereas in ‘Homer is’ ‘is’ (i.e. ‘esti’) is predicated of Homer *per se*. Abelard, in contrast to Aristotle, explains the difference not in terms of predication but in terms of the particular function of the verb ‘is’ (i.e. ‘est’) as sentential link. According to him ‘is’ (i.e. ‘est’) is properly used to express the existence of the subject, and improperly used when it is used to link a predicate without implying that the subject exists (*Dialectica* 134, 28 ff.; 136, 37 ff., 137, 3-6).

Kahn convincingly argues that the distinction copula-existential does not apply to ‘einai’ and that the Greeks felt no need to specify the notion of existence as we do. Yet, the question arises: Why existence does not emerge as a distinct concept in Greek philosophy? That is the question of chapter 3 (‘Why Existence Does Not Emerge as a Distinct Concept in Greek philosophy’). According to Kahn, in classical Greek philosophy

sentences such as ‘Centaur do not exist’ are never recognized as problematic, not to mention that reference as such is never recognized as a problem. Aristotle, for instance, does not systematically thematize in *Posterior Analytics* 2 the question ‘whether-X-is-or-not?’ The question posed in ancient philosophy is rather the question about the nature and knowledge of reality, i.e. how must the world be structured in order to be known and for there to be true and false discourse? ‘Einai’ is thus of interest for ancient philosophers insofar as it entails a notion of reality, facts and truth. In contrast, the modern concept of ‘existence’ is first articulated in Descartes’ proofs of one’s own existence, the existence of God, the existence of the external world, and the existence of other minds.

In chapter 4 (‘Some Philosophical Uses of ‘To Be’ in Plato’) Kahn turns to some philosophical uses of ‘einai’ in Plato in order to show how the incomplete use of the verb is at times indistinguishable from the predicative use. Here I present one of Kahn’s examples just to provide a rough idea of his approach. In “First of all, it [this beautiful thing] is ever-existent...next, it is not beautiful in part and in part ugly, nor is it such at such a time and other at another (*Symposium* 210E, Harold N. Fowler’s translation)” (πρῶτον μὲν αἰεὶ ὄν...ἔπειτα οὐ τῆ μὲν καλόν, τῆ δ’ αἰσχρόν, οὐδὲ τοτὲ μὲν, τοτὲ δὲ οὐ) although the participle of ‘einai’ (ὄν) appears to have at first blush a strong existential value, i.e. “it [this beautiful thing] is ever-existent”, the predicative phrases “it is not beautiful in part and in part ugly” and “nor is it such at such a time and other at another” make us realize that “it is ever-existent” can be simultaneously read as “this thing is forever beautiful”. Here no reading can be preferred over the other the first has Homeric undertones and gives literary dimension to the text, while the second provides philosophical insight, two aspects that in Plato go hand in hand. The existential use of ‘einai’, therefore, includes—or as Kahn says, is pregnant with—the copula or predicative use.

In chapter 5 (‘A Return to the Theory of the Verb *Be* and the Concept of Being’) Kahn returns to the uses and syntax of ‘einai’ in order to improve his theory. His aim here is to show that the different uses of ‘einai’ form a unified conceptual system. The central notion of that system is that of predication because the copula uses are implicitly existential and the existential uses potentially predicative. Using an example of Lesley Brown, Kahn explains that just as the meaning of the verb does not change when we add a predicate to ‘Jane teaches’, as in ‘Jane teaches French’, in the same way the meaning of ‘einai’ does not change when we add a predicate to its incomplete use. The incomplete use of ‘einai’ is an abridged form of the complete use and it always supposes an implicit predication. However, the complete-predicative-copula construction is the basic construction of the verb in the sense that it entails the veridical and existential uses. According to Kahn, ‘S is P’ entails in Greek that ‘there is a S that is P’ and this in turn entails both that ‘there is X (i.e. X exists)’ and ‘the fact XY obtains’. In a word, the affirmative copula use implies the existence of its semantic subject and carries the claim that the stated state of affairs obtains in reality.

Chapter 6 ('The Thesis of Parmenides') presents arguments against the translation of Parmenides' 'einai' as 'exists' and in favour of a veridical notion of truth and fact. For Kahn, the clue to the understanding of 'einai' in Parmenides lies in the epistemological and methodological character of the introduction of the Poem. The question of Parmenides is about knowledge and truth and in this context the subject of 'einai' is the object of knowledge, so that 'einai' cannot be an existential 'is', but rather a veridical 'is'. It follows from this that 'einai' in Parmenides simply claims that for there to be knowledge and truth, something must be the case. Kahn shows the validity of this interpretation insofar as it solves multiple philosophical puzzles and difficulties posed by Parmenides extant fragments. One of these is the meaning of the claim "Cognition and statement must be what-is" (χρῆ τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ' ἔὸν ἔμμεναι). Kahn explains that cognition is identified with its object, and true statement with what it states, simply because knowledge and true discourse are either what is the case or nothing at all. The fact that ἔὸν (participle form of 'einai') means truth as well as being makes it natural to state that true discourse and cognition cannot be nothing at all and that falsehood an error are just nothing (τὸ μὴ ἔὸν).

In Chapters 7 and 8 Kahn further clarifies and sharpens his analysis of the verb 'einai'. In chapter 7 ('Being in Parmenides and Plato'), in contrast to the previous chapters, Kahn provides a semantic, non-syntactic, interpretation of the verb. Instead of saying that Parmenides establishes his understanding of 'einai' on the veridical use, Kahn prefers to say now that Parmenides establishes his understanding of 'einai' on an extra-linguistic claim or assertion that presupposes both the 'is' of predication and the positing of an object or fact in the world. Parmenides' veridical use of 'einai', according to this new twist of Kahn's theory, boils down to positing a reality that is object of knowledge, and knowledge, of course, implies 'telling things as they are', i.e. truth. In chapter 8 ('Parmenides and Plato Once More') Kahn clarifies the affinities between the veridical interpretation of 'einai' and the predicative and existential interpretations. The veridical and predicative interpretations are not totally irreconcilable, insofar as veridical and predicative functions are aspects of the propositional structure of language and thought. On the other hand, although he has strongly criticized the existential interpretation, Kahn is not prepared to discard it altogether. He only rejects it insofar as it is presented as self-sufficient and as excluding the copula construction. In Kahn's view, on the contrary, 'einai' is essentially a predicative verb and that implies that every philosophical use of the verb is potentially predicative. Every absolute or quasi-existential use of 'einai' can be thought as awaiting further specification.

The book closes with a short concluding Postscript on Parmenides that one might have expected to round out Kahn's theory of the Greek verb 'to be'. The Postscript, however, is basically the appendix of the article that has become chapter 8 in this edition and it handles problems that do not involve the verb 'einai', such as Parmenides relation to natural philosophy, the direction of the chariot ride in his poem, and the epistemic preference for fire.

Specialists in ancient philosophy will disagree with Kahn's interpretation of particular passages of Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle. Some may disagree with Kahn's general strategy and methodology. Nonetheless this book should be of great value not only for those interested in ancient Greek philosophy, Greek intellectual culture, Greek language and Greek linguistics, but also for those with interest in the history of ontology and metaphysics. The reader can only regret that Kahn does not bother to explain what he means by terms such as 'value', 'use', and 'sense'. Overall, however, the book is well argued, makes a meaningful contribution to the interpretation of the Greek verb 'einai', informs the reader about the different scholarly views on the topic, and provides ground and inspiration for future developments.