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Key Terms in Ontology: *Being*

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The concept of *being* in linguistics

"Any linguistic study of the Greek verb be is essentially conditioned, and perhaps ultimately motivated, by the philosophic career of this word. We know what an extraordinary career it has been. It seems fair to say, with Benveniste, that the systematic development of a concept of Being in Greek philosophy from Parmenides to Aristotle, and then in a more mechanical way from the Stoics to Plotinus, relies upon the pre-existing disposition of the language to make a very general and diversified use of the verb *einai*. Furthermore, insofar as the notions expressed by *on, einai*, and *ousia* in Greek underlie the doctrines of Being, substance, essence, and existence in Latin, in Arabic, and in modern philosophy from Descartes to Heidegger and perhaps to Quine, we may say that the usage of the Greek verb be studied here forms the historical basis for the ontological tradition of the West, as the very term "ontology" suggests.

At the same time it is generally recognized that this wide range of uses for the single verb *eimi* in Greek reflects a state of affairs which is "peculiar to Indo-European languages, and by no means a universal situation or a necessary condition." (1) The present monograph series on "the verb 'be' and its synonyms" shows just how far the languages of the earth may differ from one another in their expression for existence, for predication with nouns or with adjectives, for locative predication, and so forth. The topic of be can itself scarcely be defined except by reference to Indo-European verbs representing the root *es-. The question naturally arises whether an historical peculiarity of this kind can be of any fundamental importance for general linguistics and, even more pressing, whether a concept reflecting the Indo-European use of *es- can be of any general significance in philosophy." (p. 1)

Notes

(1) Émile Benveniste, "Catégories de pensée et catégories de langue" (1958), in: *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, (Paris, 1966) p. 73.

From: Charles H. Kahn, *The Verb 'Be' in Ancient Greek*, Dordrecht: Reidel 1973, reprinted Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003 with a new Introduction).

The concept of *being* in Western philosophy before Heidegger

"The great intellectual adventure that is Greek philosophy may be regarded, on a somewhat simplistic view, as structured around three basic questions, occurring historically in the following order: What is the world made of? or What *is* there?; What should we do?; How can we know? These may be soon as lying behind what were later distinguished (perhaps first, in a formal way, I,. Plato's pupil Xenocrates as the three main divisions of Greek philosophy, physics, ethics, and logic. I am here concerned only with the first and most basic question, since that constitutes the inquiry about being. Before beginning a historical survey, it would be well to attempt a definition of the concept with which we are concerned. In the context of Greek thought, then, 'being" (often characterized by the additional qualification "real" or "true") denotes sonic single, permanent, unchanging, fundamental reality, to which is habitually opposed the inconstant flux and variety of visible things. This reality is initially seen simply as a sort of substratum out of which the multiplicity of appearances may evolve, but progressively there come to be added to it other features, such as absolute unity (or, conversely, infinite multiplicity), eternity (ultimately timelessness), incorporeality for, conversely, basic corporeality), and rationality (or, conversely, blind necessity). in short, "being" (*on,* or *ousia*) becomes in Greek philosophy the repository of all the concepts that can be thought up to characterize the idealized opposite of what we see around us -- its counterpart, which comprises all aspects of the everyday physical world, being termed "becoming" (*genesis*)." (p. 51)

From: John Dillon, *The Question of Being*, in: Jacques Brunschwig, Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd (eds.), Harvard: Harvard University Press 2000 pp. 51-71.

In a first acceptation, the word being is a noun. As such, it signifies either d being (that is, the substance, nature, and essence of anything existent), or being itself, a property common to all that which can rightly be said to be. In a second acceptation, the same word is the present participle of the verb 'to be.' As a verb, it no longer signifies something that is, nor even existence in general, but rather the very act whereby any given reality actually is, or exists. Let us call this act a 'to be,' in contradistinction to what is commonly called 'a being.' It appears at once that, at least to the mind, the relation of 'to be' to 'being' is not a reciprocal one. 'Being' is conceivable, 'to be' is not. We cannot possibly conceive an 'is' except as belonging to some thing that is, or exists. But the reverse is not true. Being is quite conceivable apart from actual existence; so much so that the very first and the most universal of all the distinctions in the realm of being is that which divides it into two classes, that of the real and that of the possible. Now what is it to conceive a being as merely possible, if not to conceive it apart from actual existence? A 'possible' is a being which has not yet received, or which has already lost, its own to be. Since being is thinkable apart from actual existence, whereas actual existence is not thinkable apart from being, philosophers will simply yield to one of the fundamental facilities of the human mind by positing being minus actual existence as the first principle of metaphysics." (pp. 2-3)

From: Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers,* Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Second edition, 1952.

"When the early Greek thinkers initiated philosophical speculation, the very first question they asked themselves was: What stuff is reality made of? Taken in itself, this question was strikingly indicative of the most fundamental need of the human mind. To understand something is for us to conceive it as identical in nature with something else that we already know. To know the nature of reality at large is therefore for us to understand that each and every one of the innumerable things which make up the universe is, at bottom, identical in nature with each and every other thing. Prompted by this unshakable conviction, unshakable because rooted in the very essence of human understanding, the early Greek thinkers successively attempted to reduce nature in general to water, then to air, then to fire, until one of them at last hit upon the right answer to the question, by saying that the primary stuff which reality is made of is being.

The answer was obviously correct, for it is not at once evident that, in the last analysis, air and fire are nothing else than water, or that, conversely, water itself is nothing else than either air or fire; but it cannot be doubted that, whatever else they may be, water, air and fire have in common at least this property, that they are. Each of them is a being, and, since the same can be said of everything else, we cannot avoid the conclusion that being is the only property certainly shared in common by all that which is. Being, then, is the fundamental and ultimate element of reality.

When he made this discovery, Parmenides of Elea at once carried metaphysical speculation to what was always to remain one of its ultimate limits; but, at the same time, he entangled himself in what still is for us one of the worst metaphysical difficulties. It had been possible for Parmenides' predecessors to identify nature with water, fire or air, without going to the trouble of defining the meaning of those terms. If I say that everything is water, everybody will understand what I mean, but if I say that everything is being, I can safely expect to be asked: what is being? For indeed we all know many beings, but what being itself is, or what it is to be, is an extremely obscure and intricate question. Parmenides could hardly avoid telling us what sort of reality being itself is. In point of fact, he was bold enough to raise the problem and clear-sighted enough to give it an answer which still deserves to hold our attention." (pp. 6-7)

From: Étienne Gilson, *Being and some philosophers* Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Second edition, 1952.

The concept of *being* according to Heidegger

"If for us Being is just an empty word and an evanescent meaning, then we must at least try to grasp fully this last remnant of a connection. So we ask, to begin with: 1. What sort of word is this anyway -- Being -- as regards its formal character as a word? 2. What does linguistics tell us about the originary meaning of this word? To put this in scholarly terms, we are asking 1) about the grammar and 2) about the etymology of the word Being.

The grammatical analysis of words is neither exclusively nor primarily concerned with their written or spoken form. It takes these formal elements as clues to definite directions and differences in direction in the possible meanings of words; these directions dictate how the words can be used within a sentence or within a larger discursive structure. (...)We can easily see that un the formation of the word Being, the decisive precursor is the infinitive 'to be.' This form of the verb is transformed into a substantive. The character of our word Being, as a word, is determined, accordingly, by three grammatical forms: verb, infinitive, and substantive. Thus our first task is to understand the meaning of these grammatical forms. Of the three we have named, verb and substantive are among those that were first recognized at the start of Western grammar and that even today are taken as the fundamental forms of words and of language in general. And so, with the question about the essence of the substantive and of the verb, we find ourselves in the midst of the question about the essence of language. For the question of whether the primordial form of the word is the noun (substantive) or the verb coincides with the question of the originary character of speech and speaking. In turn, this question entails the question of the origin of language. We cannot start by immediately going into this question. We are forced onto a detour. We will restrict ourselves in what follows to that grammatical form which provides the transitional phase in the development of the verbal substantive: the infinitive (to go, to come, to fall, to sing, to hope, to be, etc.).

What does "infinitive" mean? This term is an abbreviation of the complete one: modus infinitivus, the mode of unboundedness, of indeterminateness, regarding the manner in which a verb exercises and indicates the function and direction of its meaning. (...).

Above all we must consider the fact that the definitive differentiation of the fundamental forms of words (noun and verb) in the Greek form of onoma and rhema was worked out and first established in the most immediate and intimate connection with the conception and interpretation of Being that has been definitive for the entire West. This inner bond between these two happenings is accessible to us unimpaired and is carried out in full clarity in Plato's Sophist. The terms onoma and rhema were already known before Plato, of course. But at that time, and still in Plato, they were understood as terms denoting the use of words as a whole. Onoma means the linguistic name as distinguished from the named person or thing, and it also means the speaking of a word, which was later conceived grammatically as rhema. And rhema in turn means the spoken word, speech; the rhetor is the speaker, the orator, who uses not only verbs but also onomata in the narrower meaning of the substantive.

The fact that both terms originally governed an equally wide domain is important for our later point that the much-discussed question in linguistics of whether the noun or the verb represents the primordial form of the word is not a genuine question. This pseudo-question first arose in the context of a developed grammar rather than from a vision of the essence of language, an essence not yet dissected by grammar." (pp. 55-60, notes omitted)

From: Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* New translation by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, New Haven: Yale University Press 2000.

The history of the verb "Be" in Ancient Greek

"On the other hand, by means of the so-called noun clause the Hebrew language is much better able to express the 'static' or 'that which is' in its logical sense than the Greek and our modern languages permit with their copula and their verbs of inaction. We shall define the noun clause in agreement with Gesenius-Kautzsch, in order to be able to understand the 'being' expressed in it. Every sentence, the subject as well as the predicate of which is a noun or noun equivalent is called a noun clause, while in a verbal clause the predicate is a finite verb. This distinction is indispensable for more subtle understanding of Hebrew syntax (as of Semitics in general) because it is not merely a

matter of an external, formal distinction in meaning but of one that goes to the depths of the language. The noun clause, the predicate of which is a substantive, offers something fixed, not active, in short, a 'being'; the verbal clause on the other hand asserts something moving and in flux, an event and an action. The noun clause with a participial predicate can also assert something moving and in flux, except that here the event and action is fixed as something not active and enduring, as opposed to the verbal clause. For our purpose, it is not necessary to discuss all the various kinds of noun classes, and in particular not those with participial predicates which should logically be considered as verbal clauses." (pp. 35-36, some notes omitted)

Notes

(1) Friedrich Heinrich Wilhelm Gesenius (1786-1842) and Emil Friedrich Kautzsch (1841-1910), *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. Edited and enlarged by E. Kautzsch Translated and revised from the German 28th edition by Arthur Ernest Cowley. 2nd edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910. [Reprinted by Oxford University Press in 1995].

From: Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, English updated translation by Jules Moreau, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960; reprinted by W. W. Norton & Company, 2002. Original edition: *Das hebräische Denken im Vergleich mit dem griechischen*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952 (second revised edition 1954).

"What is the basic fact of 'being' for the Israelites will result from the analysis of the verb *hayah* that follows.
A) The verb *hayah*: We must devote special attention to this verb not only because it occurs most frequently but also because the verbal problems discussed above are concentrated in this verb and appear in it in their most difficult form. (...) The most important meanings and uses of our verb 'to be' (and its equivalents in other Indo-European languages) are: (1) to express being or existence; (2) to serve as a copula. Now, as we have shown above, Hebrew and the other Semitic languages do not need a copula because of the noun clause. As a general rule, therefore, it may be said that *hayah* is not used as a copula; real or supposed exceptions to this rule will be cited later. The characteristic mark of *hayah*, in distinction from our verb 'to be', is that it is a true verb with full verbal force. The majority of formal considerations as well as the actual ones lead to this conclusion:
I. The peculiarity of emphasizing the verbal idea by use of the infinitive absolute before finite verbs;
II. the occurrence of the passive form *Niph'al*;
III. its frequent occurrence in parallel with other verbs whose verbal force is beyond doubt; this is so frequent an occurrence that a few examples will suffice: Jahveh hurled a great wind, and a mighty tempest was (Jonah 1.4); God created (made, spoke) and the corresponding thing was (Gen. 1.3, 9, 11); its parallel use with *qûm* = 'be realized' (Isa. 7.7; 14.24); the messengers of the king command the prophet Micaiah to prophesy safety and victory, 'Let thy word be as the word of one of them (i.e. the prophets of good fortune)', (I Kings 22.13).
The meaning of hayah is apparently manifold; hayah has thus been considered to some extent a general word which can mean everything possible and therefore designates nothing characteristic. Closer examination reveals, however, that this is not the case. It is therefore necessary to establish the many meanings and shades of meaning of hayah and to find their inner connexion. We shall use first the results of Ratschow (1) who has examined the occurrences of *hayah* in the Old Testament with a thoroughness hardly to be excelled and in whose work is to be found extensive evidence. He found three principal meanings: 'to become', 'to be', and 'to effect'; but these are related internally and form a unity. In the main this will be right, and it agrees with our understanding of Hebrew thought; we must object, however, to details." (pp. 38-39, notes omitted).

Notes

(1) Carl H. Ratschow, *Werden und Wirken, Eine Untersuchung des wortes hajah als Beitrag zur Wirklichkeitserfassung des Alten Testaments* ("Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche

Wissenschaft", 70), Berlin: A. Töpelmann, 1941.

From: Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek,* English updated translation by Jules Moreau, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960; reprinted by W. W. Norton & Company, 2002. Original edition: *Das hebräische Denken im Vergleich mit dem griechischen*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952 (second revised edition 1954).

"In modern biblical theology it is commonly held that the Israelites were not interested in 'existence' as distinct from active existence, action or life; and correspondingly that the language has no means of expressing mere existence. The same seems to be the opinion of Boman, who several times says that a static being is a nothing to the Israelites.

It was mentioned earlier that 'the verb 'to be' as copula or existential was one of the subjects of the questionnaire circulated by Basson and O'Connor and reported on in their article. On this question they got an answer, and they report as follows: 'Semitic languages have in general no copula, but Hebrew and Assyrian both have a special word for "exists" '.1 Does this contradict the opinion I have just described?There are at least three linguistic phenomena which are relevant to the discussion of 'to be' in Hebrew:(a) The ordinary type of sentence where the copula 'is' is used in English, such as 'David is the king', 'he is the man', has no verb as copula in Hebrew. Hebrew uses the nominal sentence, which is a mere juxtaposition of the two elements 'David' and 'the king'. The nominal sentence is a very well-established feature of Semitic syntax. A common addition is the pronoun 'he' or 'she' introduced after the subject, giving the sentence 'David-he-the-king'. Since this pronoun is not indispensable and is indeed very frequently not so inserted, I think it can be neglected in a discussion of the copula.

(b) The verb hayah 'to be'. This is discussed at length by Boman, and I shall later make some remarks about his treatment of it. For the present we have to make clear only the most important fact for the co-ordination of hayah with other terms corresponding to English 'to be': it is only at certain points that this verb coincides in function with 'to be as copula or existential'. In a very large number of its occurrences it will be well translated by 'come to be' or 'come to pass'. Or, conversely, English sentences using 'is' in the present tense either as copula or as existential will seldom be rendered into Hebrew with hayah; they will much more normally use the nominal sentence, or the particle yel 'there is'. We are not on the other hand justified in removing hayah altogether from the sphere of what is relevant to English 'is' and making it equivalent (say) to English 'become'. For example, a statement like 'the earth is waste' will have the nominal sentence, and no verb; but if we put it in the past and say 'the earth was waste (and is no longer so)', then the verb hayah is used, as in Gen. I: 2. It would be quite perverse to insist on the meaning 'became' here, and so a certain overlap with 'be' has to be observed. In fact the sense of 'come to he' or 'come to pass' is not to be explained by going over to 'become' as the basic sense, but by noticing that very frequent uses have an ingressive element which with a verb meaning 'be' will lead to a sense roughly of 'come to be' or 'come to pass'.

(c) The word yeš; 'there is' and the opposite 'ayin or 'en 'there is not'. This is of course the 'special word for exists ' mentioned in the report above. Boman in his discussion of 'being' does not mention this frequent and important word at all. Moreover, a considerable complication is introduced into the discussion by this word. Basson and O'Connor (1) are right in saying that it is a 'special word for 'exists', in the sense that it is not normally used as a copula in sentences like 'David is the king'. You use it in sentences like 'There is a dish on the table' or 'There is a God in heaven'.

The complication to which I refer is that this word, which we might describe rather vaguely as a particle, is certainly not a verb, has some of the characteristics of the noun and may be translated 'being, existence' in a rather over-literal rendering.

(...)

"Now another point of some importance can be illustrated from this word. The point I wish to make is that the question whether the Israelites laid any emphasis on 'mere' existence as distinct from active existence of some kind is a different one from the question whether their language had words that could express 'mere' existence. The word yeš; can be well translated by 'there is', and as in English 'there is' we press too far if we try to find in it the expression of 'mere' existence. In fact many cases which use it have also some locality indicated: 'There is bread in my house', 'There is Yahweh in this place'. This is no doubt the 'existential' sense of 'is' as against the 'copula' type. Nevertheless 'exists' would not be a good translation in these sentences, since we would not

normally say 'Bread exists in my house' or 'There exists a dish on the table'. In other words, the 'existential' use of the word 'is' does not coincide semantically with 'exists' and does not raise the problem of 'mere' existence, especially when a locality is indicated."(pp. 58-61, some notes omitted)

Notes

(1) A. H. Basson, and D. J. O'Connor, "Language and Philosophy: Some Suggestions for an Empirical Approach", *Philosophy*, XXII (1947) pp. 49-65.

From: James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.

The meaning of "*εἶναι*" AND "*τὸ ὄν*" in Ancient Greek

"BEING. The closest equivalent to the word "being" in ancient Greek is *to on,* the present participle of *einai,* to be *(ON, ONTA).* The first part of Parmenides' poem has as its focus *esti,* the third person singular of *einai,* and *to eon,* the equivalent of *to on* in Parmenides' dialect. For Parmenides, "being" *(to on)* is one, timeless and changeless, and this, he says, is "the truth"; all talk about plurality and change is "opinion"*(doxa),* and not the truth about "being."

Since *to on* and *to onta* are, in ordinary Greek, often used as stand-ins for names of one or more individual things, other Greek philosophers looked for other locutions to talk about "being" in ontologically loaded contexts. One of Plato's favorite locutions to refer to the forms *(eide)* is *to ontos on,* using the adverb made from the participle to intensify its meaning, literally, "the beingly being," but typically translated into English as "the really real." *Ontos* was in common use to mean, roughly, "really" or "actually" or "in fact" but combining it with the participle seems to be Plato's coinage.

Plato also adopts the abstract noun built on the same participle, *ousia,* the stem *ont* -- plus the abstract noun ending -- *sia.* In ordinary Greek, this word must have some of the resonance that "existence" has in ordinary English, but it is most often used, outside of philosophical contexts, to talk about property or wealth or about important personal characteristics. In English translations of Plato's dialogues, the word *ousia* is sometimes rendered "Reality" and sometimes "being," while in English translations of Aristotle the word "being" fairly reliably translates *"to on,"* and *ousia* is typically translated "substance" or "entity"*(see OUSIA).*

Thus, in those of Plato's dialogues where the forms play a role the distinction between being and becoming is equivalent to the distinction between forms and phenomena *(phainomena),* or between Object of knowledge *(epistemë)* and object of opinion *(doxa).*

Aristotle does not use the locution *to ontos on;* apart from his exceedingly widespread use of the word *ousia.* We may note the locution *to on he on,* typically translated "being qua being," and *to on haplos* (that which simply is). More generally, Aristotle frequently talks of the many senses of "being": in one way, "being" (*to einai,* the infinitive, or *to on*) has as many senses as the categories (i.e., 10), but there is also a distinction between potential and actual being, between essential and accidental, and an equation of being and truth.

The Stoics tend to use the word *hyparchein* for both existence and predication." (pp. 67-68)

From: Anthony Preus, *Historical Dictionary of Ancient Greek Philosophy*, Lanham: Scarecow Press, 2007.

"*einai*: to be, to exist; *to on*: that which is, the real; *ousia*: being, essence. This verb caused great philosophical difficulty to the Greeks and consequential difficulties for us. Much of the trouble arises from the fact that one can say Platôn esti - Plato exists - or Platôn esti philosophos -- Plato is a philosopher - making use of the same verb, whereas in English 'Plato is' is at best an unidiomatic way of saying that he exists. This double use led some earlier Greek philosophers to think that a sentence beginning Platôn ouk esti... must deny the existence of Plato even if the next word is barbaros. This leads to translation difficulties for us, as for instance with the sentence ei ti phaneiê hoion hama on to kai mê on, to toiouton metaxu keisthai tou eilikrinôs ontos kai tou pantôs mê ontos (Plato Rep. 478d), which might be translated either as 'if something should appear such as both to have and not to have a certain predicate [we said that] such a thing would lie between being

clearly of that sort and not being so at all' or as 'if something should appear such that it simultaneously exists and does not exist [we said that] such a thing would lie between clearly existing and not existing at all'. It was presumably these difficulties that led Parmenides to say such things as khrê to legein to noein t'eon emmenai esti gar einai, mêden d'ouk estin - that of which one can speak and think must be: for it is possible for it, but not for nothing, to be (Parmenides in Simplicius, Physics 117.4). In an impersonal use esti frequently means 'it is possible' as in estin adikounta mêpô adikon einai - it is possible to do what is unjust without being an unjust person (Aristotle N.E. 1134a 17), and in the quotation from Parmenides above. There are also adverbial expressions such as estin hote, sometimes, and estin hôs, in some ways.".

"*on*: to on, in the widest sense, is everything that is and, as such, is contrasted with to mê on, that which is not; in a narrower use to on, sometimes called for clarity to ontôs on, the really real, is unchanging and imperishable and eternal, and is contrasted with the gignomenon that is changing and perishable. In the dispute between Parmenides and the atomists it is hard to doubt that to mê on as the non-existent is confused with empty space: oute gar an gnoiês to ge mê on: ou gar anuston -- you cannot know that which is not; it is impossible (Parmenides, fr. 2); ouden gar estin ê estai allo parex tou eontos -- nothing other than what is either is or will be (Parmenides, fr. 8). But Simplicius reports Leucippus as saying ouden mallon to on ê to mê on huparkhein -- there is that which is no more than that which is not (Simplicius, Physics 28.12); here to mê on seems to be the kenon, void; cf. the den of Democritus. In the narrower use, to men pantelôs on pantelôs gnôston -- the completely real is completely knowable (Plato Rep. 477a); ei gar panta to onta tou agathou ephietai, dêlon hoti to prôtôs agathon epekeina esti tôn ontôn -- for if everything that is aims at the good, it is clear that the primary good transcends things that are (Proclus, Elements of Theology 8); to gar houtôs on proteron têi phusei tou gignomenou esti - that which is in this [narrow] way is prior in its nature to the becoming. (Simplicius, Physics 1337.4)." (pp. 49-50)

From: James Opie Urmson, *The Greek Philosophical Vocabulary* London: Duckworth 1990.

"*on ónta* (pl.): being, beings.
1. The question of the nature of being first arose in the context of Parmenides' series of logical dichotomies between being and nonbeing (me on): that which is, cannot not be; that which is not, cannot be, i.e., a denial of passage from being to nonbeing or genesis (q.v.; fr. 2), and its corollary, a denial of change and motion (fr. 8, lines 26-33, 42-50; for the theological correlatives of this, see nous 2). Secondly, being is one and not many (fr. 8, lines 22-25) . And finally, the epistemological premiss: only being can be known or named; nonbeing cannot (fr. 3; fr. 8, line 34); see doxa. Being, in short, is a sphere (fr. 8, lines 42-4g) . Most of the later pre-Socratics denied this latter premiss (cf. stoicheion and atomon), as did Plato for whom the really real (to ontos on) were the plural eide, and who directed the latter half of the Parmenides (137b-166c) against it.
2. The solution to the nonbeing dilemma (for its epistemological solution, see doxa and heteron) and the key to the analysis of genesis began with Plato's positing of space (see hypodoche) in which genesis takes place, and which stands midway between true being and nonbeing (Tim. 52a-c). For Plato, as for Parmenides, absolute nonbeing is nonsense (Sophist 238c), but there is a relative grade illustrated not only by the Receptacle cited above, but by sensible things (aistheta) as well (Sophist 240b; Timaeus. 35a, 52c). Among the Platonic hierarchy of Forms, there is an eidos of being; indeed it is one of the most important Forms that pervade all the rest (Sophist 254b-d; compare this with the peculiar nature of on in Aristotle, Metaphysics 1003a) . Further, Plato distinguishes real beings (ontos onta) from those that have genesis, and in Timaeus 28a he works out an epistemological-ontological correlation: onta are known by thought (noesis) accompanied by a rational account (logos); generated beings are grasped by opinion (or judgment, see doxa) based on sensation (aisthesis).
3. Since being is the object of the science of metaphysics (Metaphysics 1031a) Aristotle's treatment of on is much more elaborate. The first distinction is between "being qua being" (to on he on), which is the object of metaphysics, and individual beings (onta), which are the objects of the other sciences. This is the view in Metaphysics 1003a, but Aristotle is not consistent on the point: elsewhere (see Metaphysics 1026a; Physics 192a, 194b; De an. 403b) he states that metaphysics studies being that is separate and unmoving (see theologia). Again, 'being' is peculiar in that it is defined not univocally or generically, but analogously through all the categories (Metaphysics

1003a), and in this it is like 'one' (hen) (Metaphysics 1053b) and 'good' (agathon) (ibid. Nichomachean Ethics I, 1096b) ; see katholou. There follows a basic distinction (ibid. 1017a-b): something 'is' either accidentally, or essentially, or epistemologically, or in the dichotomy act (energeia) / potency (dynamis). The epistemological 'being' (see doxa) is dealt with elsewhere (see Metaphysics 1027b-1028a, 1051a-1152a), as is potency/act (see Metaphysics Theta passim), so Aristotle here concentrates his attention on what 'is' essentially. It is something that falls within the ten kategoriai (Metaphysics 1017a) and is, primarily, substance (ousia; ibid. 1028a-b). A somewhat different point of view emerges from Aristotle's breakdown of the various senses of nonbeing (me on) in Metaphysics 1069b and 1089a: something is not either as a negative proposition, i.e., a denial of one of the predicates, or as a false proposition, or finally, kata dynamin, i.e., by being something else only potentially but not actually. It is from this latter that genesis comes about (see also dynamis, energeia, steresis) .

4. In the Plotinian universe the One (hen) is beyond being (Enneads V, 9, 3; compare Plato's description of the Good beyond Being in Republic 509b and see hyperousia). The realm of being begins on the level of nous since both being and nous are contained in nous (ibid. V, 5, 2; V, 9, 7). Nonbeing is treated in much the Platonic and Aristotelian fashion: matter (hyle) that is only a replica (eikon) of being is only quasi-being (Enneads I, 8, 3). Philo, with his strongly developed feeling of divine transcendence (see hyperousia), restricts true being to God alone (Quod deterius potiori insidiari soleat. 44., 160), arid introduces into the discussion the metaphysical interpretation of the famous phrase in Exodus 3, 14: 'I am who am'; see hypodoche, hyle, genesis." (pp. 141-142)

From: Francis Edwards Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms. A Historical Lexicon* New York: New York University Press, 1967.

"There can be no doubt that Parmenides' Goddess's philosophy course is concerned with 'being.' But saying this is not saying anything. In Greek, as in Spanish [or English], 'to be' is a verb and, like any verb it can be used as a noun, and then we can speak of 'being' (used as a noun). But this verbal noun is essentially different in Greek than it is in other languages, and so we cannot ignore the problem. This specificity is one of the results of the flexibility of the Greek language, which permits all kinds of juggling. E. Benveniste wrote that "the linguistic structure of Greek created the predisposition for the notion 'to be' to have a philosophical vocation." (1) Indeed, the use of the verb 'to be' as a noun absolutely does not mean what Philosophers call 'being' (the noun). To use an infinitive as a noun in Spanish it must be preceded by an article, in this case 'el' ['the']. Then the infinitive 'ser'"['to be'] becomes 'el ser' ['the being'] used as a noun, in Greek 'tò eînai.' However, this formula never figured among the concerns of the Greek philosophers. No Greek philosopher who inquired into what today we might call 'the being of things,' or even 'certain types of beings,' including the supreme being, ever asked 'what is tò eînai?' literally 'what is being?' As we know, especially since the Aristotelian systemization, the formula used by all Greek philosophers to ask the question of being is tí esti tò ón (to eon in Parmenides), 'What is being?' 'Tò eon' is the present participle of the verb to be, used as a noun. The difficulty of grasping the scope of this neuter present participle (since there is also a masculine and a feminine present participle) has always given rise to all kinds of misunderstandings, since its use as a noun, represented by the neuter article 'tó,' is deceptive, and so Parmenides avoids it whenever he can. Indeed, just as verbal-noun infinitives always have a dynamic character, something similar occurs with the participle tò on, which as a present participle means that which is being,' that which engages in the act of being now. In all that I have said up till now, philosophy is absent: I have only summarized, perhaps too superficially, what Benveniste calls 'un fait de langue,'" (2) a fact about Greek simply as a language. It is upon this linguistic fact that Parmenides reflects. In Greek the word for 'things' is ónta. Even in current everyday language, things are 'beings,' 'something(s) that is (are),' 'that which is being.' Philosophy has not yet come into it: that's the way the Greek language is. But why do we call something that is a 'being'? Because the fact of being manifests itself in that which is; if there is that which is, then the fact of being is assumed. Without the fact of being, there would not be things that are. This sort of platitude will constitute the nucleus of Parmenides' philosophy. And that is the reason why his thinking starts from an analysis of the notion of the fact of being, arrived at from the evidence that 'is' is occurring. If there is something undeniable for anyone who is, it is 'is.' If Greek syntax allowed the formula, we could say, with R. Regvald, that the basic question would be 'tí esti ésti,' 'What is 'is'?" (pp. 59-60, some notes omitted)

Notes

(1) Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Paris: Gallimard, 1959 p. 73.
(2) *ibid.* p. 71 note 1.

From: Néstor-Luis Cordero, *By Being, It Is. The Thesis of Parmenides* Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2004.

"It is an understatement to claim that 'being' is one of the central concepts of ancient Greek metaphysics. Unfortunately, there is a split between contemporary commentators as to what is under discussion when being is the topic. On one side are those who think that these discussions are basically about existence; what exists, the various sorts of existence, what can be inferred from the fact that something exists, etc. On the other side are those who believe that these discussions are investigations into the nature of predication; of being something or other, the various ways a thing can be what it is, what can be inferred from the fact that a thing is something or other, etc. Obviously these are two quite different topics. For example, on the existence interpretation, as I shall call it, one of Parmenides' main points is that we cannot (meaningfully) speak of what does not exist. His mistake is to think that words and phrases which purport to refer but which do not refer are meaningless. On the predication approach, Parmenides is correctly pointing out that we cannot speak about nothing (what is not anything at all) and still be speaking. His mistake is to confuse not being something or other with not being anything at all. (1) On the existence interpretation, it is perhaps fair to say that Plato's distinction between real being and a lesser sort is a distinction between kinds of existence. On the predication approach, it is a distinction between really being this or that and being in a way or qualifiedly this or that. One's view of Greek metaphysics is going to be strongly influenced by which approach one takes. A little can be said about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two approaches without getting into the details where, as we all know, the devil dwells. In philosophical discussions of being we frequently find the Greek, 'èsti', occurring without a completion. On the predication approach, sentences of the form, 'x is', are understood as meaning much the same as, 'x is something or other', in the way that, 'x sees', means much the same as, 'x sees something or other'. Furthermore, 'x is something or other', is understood as different in meaning from, 'x exists'. For example, Centaurs do not exist but they are mythical creatures, discussed, thought of and sometimes believed in. Thus, they are something or other though they do not exist. The problem for the predication approach is that there is no unambiguous use of, 'x is', to mean, 'x is something or other', in ordinary Greek. Such sentences can, however, mean, 'x exists'. This is a significant point in favor of the existence reading. This would probably be the end of the story were it not for the fact that in the metaphysical texts in question examples are given or inferences are drawn which make it clear that predication is in some way involved. For example, in the Theaetetus, 152 a ff., Socrates introduces Protagoras' relativism as follows: "Man is the measure of all things - of the things that are that they are and of the things that are not that they are not." Though an existential reading is perfectly natural, it is all but contradicted by what follows. Socrates illustrates the quoted dictum by pointing out that a wind may be chilly to one person and not chilly to another, i. e., that a thing may be thus and so to one person and not be that to another. Existence seems not to be in question. The strength of the predication approach stems from the fact that frequently the philosophical texts in question require us to somehow understand the verb,'ἐστί', as the copula."

"Mohan Matthen, "Greek Ontology and the 'Is' of Truth", presents and defends what is perhaps the most detailed and well worked out existence approach in the literature.(2) After pointing out that Greek philosophers sometimes use the verb, 'einai', in such a way that it seems to express both existence and predication, he presents an interesting account of this phenomenon which allows us to read absolute occurrences of the verb as neither the copula nor as (con)fused but as meaning simply, 'exists'. The assimilation of these occurrences to the copula is achieved by arguing that speakers of ancient Greek were committed to the existence of a type of entity which is unfamiliar to us and which he calls a 'predicative complex'.(3) These are entities which exist as long as, and only as long as, a corresponding predicative sentence is true." (pp. 321-322)

Notes

(1) Richard J. Ketchum "Parmenides on What There Is", Canadian Journal of Philosophy, 20/2 (1990), 167-190.

(2) "Greek Ontology and the 'Is' of Truth", Phronesis, 28/2 (1983), 113-135.

(3) Matthen sometimes writes as if his thesis is restricted to philosophical Ancient Greek as opposed to Ancient Greek generally. For example, the task he sets for himself is to explain why Greek Ontologists accepted some principles which he in turn uses to account for the apparent ambiguity (p. 116). I shall assume here, however, that this thesis is intended to cover Ancient Greek generally. Greek ontologists other than Aristotle were at least sometimes writing for the general public. If the principles in question were accepted only by the ontologists, the various uses of 'shat' would have been as confusing to the ancient Greek as they are to us. If we restricted the thesis to ontologists, we would also need some explanation as to why the ontologists assumed principles of which the ordinary Greek was unaware."

From: Richard J. Ketchum, "Being and Existence in Greek Ontology", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 80, 1998, pp. 321-332.

From Greek to Latin: Seneca's Epistle 58

"Today more than ever I understood how impoverished, indeed destitute, our vocabulary is. When we happened to be discussing Plato, a thousand things came up which needed names but lacked them; but there were some which, though they used to have names, had lost them owing to our fussiness. But who would tolerate fussiness in the midst of destitution?

(...)

6. You're asking, 'What is the point of this introduction? What's the purpose?' I won't hide it from you. I want, if possible, to use the term 'essentia' with your approval; but if that is not possible I will use the term even if it annoys you. I can cite Cicero as an authority for this word, an abundantly influential one in my view. If you are looking for someone more up-to-date, I can cite Fabianus, who is learned and sophisticated, with a style polished enough even for our contemporary fussiness. For what will happen, Lucilius [if we don't allow essentia]? How will [the Greek term] ousia be referred to, an indispensable thing, by its nature containing the foundation of all things? So I beg you to permit me to use this word. Still, I shall take care to use the permission you grant very sparingly. Maybe I'll be content just to have the permission

7. What good will your indulgence do when I can find no way to express in Latin the very notion which provoked my criticism of our language? Your condemnation of our Roman limitations will be more intense if you find out that there is a one-syllable word for which I cannot find a substitute. What syllable is this, you ask? To on. You think I am dull-witted -- it is obvious that the word can be translated as 'what is'. But I see a big difference between the terms. I am forced to replace a noun with a verb. But if I must, I will use 'what is'

8. Our friend, a very learned person, was saying today that this term has six senses in Plato. I will be able to explain all of them to you, if I first point out that there is such a thing as a genus and so too a species. But we are now looking for that primary genus on which other species depend and which is the source of every division and in which all things are included. It will be found if we start to pick things out, one by one, starting in reverse order. We will thus be brought to the primary [genus]."

(pp. 3-4)

From: Seneca, *Selected Philosophical Letters*, Translated with an Introduction and Commentary by Brad Inwood, New York: Oxford University Press 2007.