

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

PHILOSOPHY

KAHN (C.) **Essays on Being**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 240. £30. 9780199534897.

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This volume collects eight of Kahn's articles from 1966 to 2004, with a 15-page introduction and a previously unpublished 12-page postscript to one article, concerning a variety of issues on Parmenides unrelated to the titular topic. Kahn's work on the interpretation of being in Greek philosophy and literature is seminal, and it is most welcome to have these articles in one volume. It is partly because Kahn's contribution is important, partly because the issue is thorny and partly because his thought on the issue has evolved over time that one might wish for more. Kahn sketches the development of his view in the short introduction, but the articles are unrevised, and it is largely left to the reader to answer questions of compatibility.

It is a commonplace today to note that expressions such as 'to be', *einai* and their cognates, in English and Greek respectively, are ambiguous among different meanings in various sentential contexts. These contexts include predications such as 'Socrates is pale' and existential claims such as *Kallias estin*, as well as identity claims such as 'Superman is Clark Kent' and generic claims such as 'Man is mortal'. Many ancient writers seem not to distinguish among these distinct meanings but freely move from one to another. Rather than charging these authors with a fallacy of equivocation, Kahn and others have sought to characterize a uniform sense of *einai* which would license these inferences. Although in early work, Kahn emphasizes the primacy of a veridical sense of *einai* as 'to be true' or 'to be the case', in later work, he emphasizes the primacy of the predicative sense. In ordinary contexts of predication, the speaker purports to assert a truth about an existing object. So the predicative sense of *einai* implicitly connotes existential and veridical claims, and these connotations can be made explicit through certain grammatical transformations. As such, Kahn argues that, although the Greeks can express existential claims, they lack a notion of existence as entirely distinct from predication. Furthermore, although the Greeks can use *einai* to link a subject with a predicate, they lack a notion of a copula, the sole semantic

role of which is to link subject and predicate, and which lacks existential import. An apparent counter example to this latter claim is a predication with an empty term, such as Aristotle's repeated example of 'goat-stag', as its subject; Kahn does not discuss in detail these cases.

Some of the articles in this volume are required reading for the scholar of ancient philosophy. But their value ranges further. The classicist, the medievalist and, in particular, the philosopher will benefit from its study. One of Kahn's stated aims is to provide a historical perspective for a critical reflection on the modern distinctions of various meanings of 'to be'. He implies (4–5) that the unitary view of the ancients is preferable and occasionally returns to this conjecture but offers little argument for this assessment. On page 37, for example, he hints that the reluctance of many of the Greeks to distinguish between fact and thing may be an advantage, in so far as it encourages an outlook under which fact and existence are only part of a philosophical concern with the general question of being. A concern with the broader philosophical question of what is being *per se* and not the narrower question, typical of contemporary analytic philosophy, of what kinds of things are among the existents, is perhaps a characteristic motif in ancient philosophy. But it is obscure to this reader how precisely the alleged conflation of fact and existence promotes the broader question. And this and other such teasers unfortunately are not developed. As such (and also since much of the Greek, Latin, French and German is untranslated) the volume may reach a small audience of contemporary metaphysicians – a pity, for there is a recent surge of interest in metaontology and a more widely disseminated history could enrich this current debate.

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