Chapter 1

Emergence of being

Concepts of being, essence, and existence as forming one single notion in the contemporary philosophy does not figure as a distinct topic of inquiry in the early Greek philosophers from Parmenides who first hits it, come to a more systematic thought in Plato and Aristotle’s philosophy. Existence in the modern sense becomes a central topic under influence of dualism in Descartes, his doubts about existence of external world, and
further developed after Descartes in the arguments about the existence of “other minds.”¹

Shifting the meaning of being from “to be” as general, universal and real to noun “being” as a concrete, substance, essence, nature in the world, starts with Aristotle. For him “a being” is conceivable and real, while “to be” is not. We cannot conceive “to be” except, as belonging to something that exists, and reverse is not true. A “being” is quite conceivable apart from its actual existence that is possible. A “possible” is a dependence being which has not yet received, or which has already its own essence, or being. This is the first step in making distinction in the realm of being that Aristotle established. He divided the concept of being in to the real and possible, which later rendered to conceptualism in Kant.

In a certain sense, being becomes conceivable apart from existence according to Kant. He says in his famous passage of “Critique of Pure Reason” which deals with the so-called ontological proof for the existence of God: “being is evidently not a real predicate or a concept of something that can be added

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to the concept of a thing. What Kant means is that in our concept of any thing, which represents that thing plus existence, there would be the same with our concept represent that thing its existence. There is no difference between the conceptual content of our notion of a thing conceived as existing and the conceptual content of our notion of identically the same thing, not conceived as existing. If “to be” of a thing could be conceived apart from that which exist, it should be represented in our mind by some note distinct from the concept of the thing itself, whereas there is nothing that would add to a concept in order to make it represent its object as existing, if we add anything to it, is that, it represents something else. If we mentally add a cent to the concept of a hundred dollars we will change it into the concept of a hundred dollars and one cent. Therefore, actual existence is not a real predicate to add anything more to our concept of a thing.

The modern concept of existence took a new contemporary reverse as result of development of quantification theory in logic, and a new set of problems as a consequence of Russell’s puzzles about non-existence subjects such as ‘the present king of France’.

The concept of “to be” (tō ὄγ) for Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle is that one thing represents the reality in the world, if reality is that which is, then there is nothing real but being. In the essence of being all objects of world share in it, then they are; while what do not share in it, are not. By reality is meant whatever we can describe in a very general sense of “the world.” This world for Parmenides is material, for Plato an idea, and for Aristotle the concrete things in it.

“The concept of truth in Greek philosophy involves some kind of correlation or “fit” between what is said or thought, on one side, and what is, or what is the case or the way things are on the other hand,. Let us call this the correlation between assertion and reality”. For instance: when I say either in thought or in speech that “the flower is smelling” and if what I say is true, then the corresponding “reality” is the fact that the subject exists and smelling. In other words, “being” or “what is” is what I can and should believe, because it leads us to truth and it is identical with reality. Being and truth are explicitly contrasted with the appearance or false seeming and erroneous opinion.

Non-emergence of existence as topic in Greek philosophy doesn’t mean that they rarely discuss subject of existence. They, on the other hand, sometimes use it, but not as topic. G.E.L. Owen has defined descriptively different interpretation of existence in Aristotle. The point is that what is important to Aristotle in these passages is not make a distinctive existential group as it is in contemporary philosophy.

On the other hand,, sometimes, Greek philosophers use this concept in many idioms. “Such idioms are used by Plato in arguing for the existence of the god (in law x) and by Aristotle in discussing whether or not there is an infinite or void (in Physics III and IV).\(^1\) Therefore, when they say “there is” it refers to existence and real being.

This brief survey of discussion of existence from Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle to Kant is merely to show that the concept of existence does not emerge as specific topic in Greek philosophy as it has been in western philosophy, after Renaissance to contemporary philosophies. Now to know what the being is in Plato we should understand what the first concept of the being is, which is hinted by Parmenides.

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First meaning of the being:

Parmenides

When the early Greek thinkers encountered with the changes in the universe that initiated philosophical speculation, dazzled by the very first question, they asked themselves: what reality is made of? Each of them in their last fundamental analysis identified an element as basic and ultimate element of reality, which made up the universe. They reduce nature in general to water, air and fire. Finally Parmenides reaches the extraordinary conclusion that water, air and fire have in common this property that they are. Each of them is a being and shared in common by that property, which is. The only unchanging item in the world is being.

Being and non-being or reality and appearance

In reply to the question of “what is being”, Parmenides says: all of that which is, is being and every thing is different from being, is not. That being is being itself. There is no intermediate condition between being and non-being, “being is”, and “it is impossible that non-being be”, in other words,
either being exists or it does not exist. He excludes non-existence from the conception of being saying that:

“In the first place it can not have come into being. If it had, it must have arisen from nothing or from something. It cannot have arisen from nothing; for there is nothing. It can not have arisen from something; for there is nothing else than what is.”

Then he proves the properties of being as if all that which is, is being, it is unique, universal, and self-subsistent. A cause for its existence is inconceivable, for its cause would have first been to be. Any conceivable cause of its destruction would also to be before destroying it, in other words, being is eternal and imperishable. It is unchangeable, for any modification in its structure would consist of something else (non-being which is impossible). It is not subjected to division, for, there is no place within being itself that could exist or to be, it is absolute full, this is in the in structure of nature of being.

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“Being alone is, and there is no other alternative for any conceivable reality, than either to be that which being itself-actually is, or else not to be at all.”1

He says about men who realize no difference between being and non-being are deaf and blind: “It is necessary both to say and think that being is; for it is possible that being is, and it is impossible that non-being is; that is what I did thee ponder. I restrain thee from this first course of investigation; and from that course also along which mortals knowing nothing wander aimlessly, since helplessness directs the roaming thought in their bosoms, and they are born one deaf and like-wise blind, amazed, head strong races, they who consider being and non-being as the same and not the same; and that all things follow a back-turning course.”2

Parmenides believes in being existing alone and having extension all over the world: the source of it is itself, not non-being:

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“There is left but this single path to tell thee of: namely, that being is. And on this path there are many proofs that being is without beginning and indestructible; it is universal, existing alone, immovable and without end; nor ever it, not will it be, since it now *is*, all together, one, and continuous. For what generating of it will thou seek out? What dose it grow from, and how? I will not permit thee to say or think that it came from not-being”.¹ “For it is impossible to think or to say that not-being is. What thing would then have stirred it into activity that it should arise from not-being later rather than earlier? So it is necessary that being either is absolutely or is not. Nor will the force of argument permit that anything spring from being except being itself. Therefore, justice does not slacken her fetters to permit generation or destruction but holds being from.”²

**Properties of Being**

Parmenides illustrates that being is material without any difference in it, like a ball: “But since there is a further limit, it is perfected, like the bulk of a ball well-rounded on every side, equally balanced in every direction from the center. For it

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¹. Ibid, Number 60, P.115
². Ibid, 65. P. 116
cannot be bigger or smaller here or there. For neither it is non-existent, which would stop it from reaching its like, not it is existence in such a way that there would be more being here, less there, since it is all inviolate; for being is equal to itself on every side, it lies uniformly within its limits."

Parmenides explains that the being is invisible bodily mass, external, perfect, static, unchangeable, spatial, extension and invisible which is contrasted with becoming as mortal, imperfect, changeable thing:

“Further it is unmoved, in the hold of great chain, without beginning or end, since generation and destruction have completely disappeared and true belief has rejected them. It lies the same, abiding in the same state and by itself; accordingly it abides fixed in the same spot. For powerful necessity hold it in confining bonds which restrain it in all sides. Therefore, divine right does not permit being to have any end; but it is lacking in nothing, for it lacked anything it would lack every thing.”

The other most important property of being for Parmenides is its objectivity. For him being appears everywhere

\[1. \: \text{Ibid.}\]
\[2. \: \text{Ibid, 85.P.116}\]
and every time by its self-identity, which is equated with reality, it means it ought to be intelligible to human understanding. Therefore, being and thought are one.

Conclusion

This selection of Parmenides discourses is merely to indicate that Plato as continuator of his doctrine has established a systematic philosophy which before was, not only created crudely by Parmenides as the science of being as being, but reaching at a philosophical position.

Plato considers that the being is always basic reality made up of “forms” which share many properties that Parmenides has not elaborated, but regarding with the concrete world of changing and becoming Plato creates intermediates; sensible things which are ceaselessly being born and passing away, apprehended by opinion and sense, are not being while they aren’t non-being. They have in their appearances some reality, which cannot be non-being.

Parmenides in his doctrine of being conceived all real properties belong to “being” as material objects that is contrast with Plato’s doctrine that regarded all of them belong to
“forms” or ideas. What we can say tentatively is that both share the belief that there are some attributes of real being and truth, one ascribed these to immaterial things, and the other referred them to material objects. The more important result is that both agree on being in itself as truth and real.