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Parmenides and the Question of Being in Greek Thought

Contents

This part of the section [History of Ontology](#) includes of the following pages:

The Thought of Parmenides:

[Parmenides and the Question of Being in Greek Thought \(Current page\)](#)

[Critical Notes on His Fragments \(Diels Kranz fr. 1-3\)](#)

[Critical Editions and translations](#)

Annotated bibliography of studies on Parmenides in English:

[A - B](#)

[C - E](#)

[F - G](#)

[H - K](#)

[L - Mos](#)

[Mou - Q](#)

[R - Sta](#)

[Ste - Z](#)

Bibliographies on Parmenides in other languages:

[Bibliographie des études en Français](#)

[Bibliografia degli studi in Italiano](#)

[Bibliographie der Studien auf Deutsch](#)

[Bibliografía de estudios en Español](#)

[Bibliografía de estudos em Português](#)

[Index of the Section: Ancient Philosophy from the Presocratics to the Hellenistic Period](#)



[Annotated bibliography of the studies in English: Complete PDF Version](#) on the website [Academia.edu](#)

Introduction

"Parmenides began Philosophy proper." G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Vol. I Greek Philosophy to Plato*, (1825), Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1995, p. 254

"In the beginning of Western thinking, the saying of Parmenides speaks to us for the first time of what is called thinking." Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* (1954), New York: Harper & Row 1967, p. 196

This page is dedicated to an analysis of the first section of Parmenides' Poem, the *Way of Truth*, with a selection of critical judgments by the most important commentators and critics.

In the *Annotated bibliography* (see the links at the end of the page) I list the main critical editions (from the first printed edition of 1573 to present days) and the translations in English, French, German, Italian and Spanish, and I give a selection of recent studies on Parmenides; in future, a section will be dedicated to an examination of some critical variants of the Greek text, with particular attention to corrections to the Diels-Kranz (abbreviated DK) edition of the *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*.

The fragments of Parmenides' Poem are cited according to Diels-Kranz numbering system as adopted in the 6th edition, Berlin 1952; the Poem is divided into three parts: the *Proem* fr. I, 1-32; the *Way of Truth (Alethéia)* from fr. II to VIII, 49, and the *Way of Mortal Opinion (Doxa)* fr. VIII, 50 to XIX, 3.

Complete references of the texts cited are given in the *Annotated bibliography*.

The Question of Being in Parmenides' Poem

"The problem of being was first posed in the West by the Greek Parmenides in the fifth century B.C. (...)

Parmenides flourished in Elea, a Greek colony on the west coast of Italy, south of the Gulf of Salerno. The colony had been founded about 540 B.C. by Greeks from Ionia, who evidently brought with them the Ionian interest in the origin and development of the visible universe. At any rate, some fifty years after the foundation of the colony, a philosophical poem composed by Parmenides handed down the first recorded Western attempt to account for the universe in terms of being, instead of through the Ionian way of change and growth. This poem of Parmenides had far-reaching effects on subsequent philosophic development, as is amply attested in later Greek writings. It continued to be read for about a thousand years, and its tenets were discussed penetratingly by thinkers of the stature of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. Its influence on the thought of lesser figures

is apparent. By the time the last copy of the complete poem had disappeared it had been quoted so abundantly by other writers that the sections and verses copied allow the general structure of the poem to be reestablished and permit the characteristic tenets attributed in tradition to Parmenides to be studied in the fragments themselves.

The poem had three parts, which formed a unified whole. The fragments that remain show how the second part followed in express sequence upon the first, and the third in express sequence upon the second. The first part was an introduction or proem, the second dealt with being, and the third with the way things appear to men. The composition fits into a recognized literary genre of the time. Somewhat as in Hesiod's *Theogony* (1-108) the goddesses appear to the poet at the foot of their sacred mountain and impart to him the truth about the way the immortal gods came into being, so Parmenides in the proem of his work introduces himself as being borne along in a chariot guided by sun maidens who 'leaving behind the dwellings of night, sped me toward light' (Fr. 1.9-10; DK, 28 B). There Parmenides is warmly welcomed by a goddess into her home. She tells him he is to learn from her 'all things, both the unwavering heart of well-rounded truth, and the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true assurance.' (4) The two other sections of the poem go on then to show him first what the truth is, and second how things appear as they do to mortal men.

The tenses used by Parmenides in the proem indicate clearly enough that he was describing a journey made regularly, quite as a philosopher repeatedly journeys into the regions of his thought. (5) In consequence the poem is meant to describe the travel of the philosopher in his own proper world. The road traveled is characterized as "far away from the wandering of men. (6) On it Parmenides is to learn first the truth about all things, and then how the contrasted appearances are able to penetrate all in a way that makes them so readily acceptable to human cognition.(7) The contrast is clear between truth and appearance. Things are considered to appear to men in a way radically different from what the truth about them reveals. In this framework the second section of the poem intends to explain the truth, while the third section will explain how things are able to appear to men in a way different from the truth about them. The proem envisages truth as something unwavering, something firm and stable. The way men ordinarily think is, on the contrary, wandering, 'unstable. Appearance -- the ordinary thinking of mortals -- is in this manner sharply contrasted with the inspired teaching of the goddess.

The fragment accepted as second in order, listed immediately after the proem and consequently as the first statement in our record of the poem's section on being, states that only two ways of inquiry can be thought of. One is that (it) is and that (for it) not to be is impossible. This is the way that follows truth. The other is that (it) is not and that (for it) not to be is of necessity. This path offers no possibility whatever for inquiry, since non-being cannot possibly be known or expressed (Fr. 2). The fragment accepted as third then gives the reason in a rather cryptic statement that translated word for word reads "For the same thing is to think and to be" (Fr. 3).

These assertions maintain that being follows upon or accompanies truth. Truth, as envisaged in the proem, is accordingly to be given in terms of being. The stability or firmness required by the proem is here couched in the necessity involved by being. Being necessarily excludes non-being. No stronger type of stability could be found. This necessity is seen extended to everything that can be thought of or expressed. All that remains outside it is non-being, which likewise involves its own impossibility and in consequence is a path of inquiry that cannot even be entered. The basic reason given in the fragment is that non-being cannot possibly be known or expressed. If the third fragment followed immediately, it would confirm this reason with a positive statement: what is able to be known and what is able to be are the same thing.(8) That is the minimal bearing of the fragment, and seems entirely appropriate at this initial stage of the reasoning. So understood it appeals to an immediate evidence, namely, that whatever is known is known as a being. If you try to represent non-being you find it impossible.

Translated as "For thinking and being are the same," Fragment 3 gives a maximal sense that may well turn out to be in accord with Parmenides' overall thought. But can it be regarded as an immediate evidence?

Is it not rather part of a conclusion that being is a whole and is identified with all things, including thought? If that is its meaning, should not the fragment be located later in the poem, and not at the beginning of the second section? Located immediately after Fragment 2, it should express a basic evidence that shows why the path of non-being cannot even be entered. This evidence is the immediate experience that whatever is thought of is necessarily thought of and expressed in terms of being. In consequence the alleged path of non-being cannot offer any possibility for inquiry.

However, mortals do in fact travel a path different from that of truth. It is readily observable. It seems to wander back and forth between being and non-being. It seems to assess them as the same yet not the same

(Fr. 6). Ordinary custom is regarded as urging men toward it. Yet it as well as the path of non-being is forbidden to Parmenides. Instead, he is told by the goddess to judge by reason (logos) the controversial argument

given in her words (Fr. 7). The way of being is then sketched (Fr. 8). It shows that what exists cannot be engendered or destroyed and that it cannot change or be subject to differentiation, for any of these would

require the presence of non-being. Being is accordingly whole and entire, held firmly within its limits, neither more nor less in any direction. For it all things will be a name (or, in regard to it all things are named),(9) "whatever mortals have established believing that they are true, that they come to be and perish, that they are and are not, that they change in place and vary through range of bright color" (Fr. 8.39-41).

What is the notion of being that is offered under this rather difficult phrasing? It is something that necessarily excludes non-being from its range, and on the other hand includes everything that is or exists. Any

distinction between "is" and "exists" is bound to prove futile in this context. There are only two sides to the division. One is utter nothingness, and cannot even be thought of. All else, whether expressed in terms of being or in terms of existence, falls on the other side.

But precisely what is it that is or exists? In most cases no subject at all is expressed in the Greek. In those cases in which it is expressed, the participial or infinitive form of the verb "to be" is used. Nothing other than being seems envisaged as the subject. The question accordingly returns to the original formulation: What is the notion of being that is intended in the phrases of Parmenides? Modern views differ widely.(10) However, the text does not give any subject other than being, and usually does not feel any necessity to express even that. This indicates plainly that Parmenides is seeing no distinction in fact between being and the subject that is or exists. They are regarded by him as one and the same. He writes as though this is a matter of immediate intuition. If this analysis of the beginning of the section on being is correct, Parmenides is immediately intuiting being as something necessarily different from non-being. It is a matter of just looking and seeing. You see at once that you think in terms of being, and cannot think or express non-being. Under intense philosophical scrutiny, being seems intuited after the manner in which the ordinary mortal considers himself to be intuiting color or extension or movement.

But precisely what is this being that is so intuited? Is it something corporeal or something incorporeal, something ideal or something real? The historical background against which Parmenides did his thinking would tend to limit it to the corporeal and the real. The Ionian as well as the Pythagorean thought which Parmenides could be expected to have absorbed as he grew up could hardly have directed his attention to anything beyond the visible and extended world. It was that world that his predecessors had been striving to understand and explain. It is that world that Parmenides expressly endeavors to understand and explain in the final section of his poem. He offers, it is true, an unexpected and utterly original explanation of it. But nothing else in all the poem seems indicated as the object of his study. In the setting in which Parmenides thought and wrote, anything other than the visible and tangible universe would seem incongruous as a subject for philosophizing. In the composition of the poem, moreover, the poem envisages Parmenides as located in a world of change and highly differentiated objects, and using them as a means to rise to light. The starting point of the philosophical journey seems in this way to be represented as a world of plurality and change, a world already known in the opinions of mortals but now to be explained from the viewpoint of truth." (pp. 17-21)

Notes

(4) Fr. 1.28-30 See Tarán, *Parmenides*, on the controversies about the meaning of these lines (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965) pp. 210-216.

(5) See Tarán pp. 9-13.

(6) Fr. 1.27 translated by Tarán p. 9; cfr. p. 16

(7) Fr. 1.31-32. On the problems in these two lines, see Tarán, pp. 211-15; and Alexander P.D. Mourelatos, *The Route of Parmenides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 194-219.

(8) On the translations of the fragment, see Tarán, pp. 41-44; also Mourelatos, pp. 165-80, on the parallel statement at Fr. 8.34-36.

(9) See Leonard Woodbury, "Parmenides on Names," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 63 (1958) : 145-60; reprinted, with slight revisions, in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. John P. Anton and George L. Kustas (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971), pp. 145-62. Tarán's views are discussed in the revised version, p. 161, n. 29a; cf. p. 60, n. 18a. A coverage of the topic at about the same time may be found in Mourelatos, pp. 181-91.

(10) For a survey and discussion, see Tarán, pp. 33-36; Mourelatos, pp. 269-76; Leo Sweeney, *Infinity in the Presocratics* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973), pp. 93-110. In solidarity with proem, Charles H. Kahn, "The Thesis of Parmenides," *Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1969) : 710, views the subject as "the knowable."

From: Joseph Owens, *Being in Early Western Tradition*, in: Mervyn Sprung (ed.), *The Question of Being. East-West Perspectives*, University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press 1995.

"Parmenides of Elea, a revolutionary and enigmatic Greek philosophical poet, was the earliest defender of Eleatic metaphysics. He argued for the essential homogeneity and changelessness of being, rejecting as spurious the world's apparent variation over space and time. His one poem, whose first half largely survives, opens with the allegory of an intellectual journey by which Parmenides has succeeded in standing back from the empirical world. He learns, from the mouth of an unnamed goddess, a dramatically new perspective on being. The goddess's disquisition, which fills the remainder of the poem, is divided into two parts; the Way of Truth and the Way of Seeming. The Way of Truth is the earliest known passage of sustained argument in Western philosophy. First a purportedly exhaustive choice is offered between two 'paths' - that of being, and that of not-being. Next the not-being path is closed off the predicate expression '... is not' could never be supplied with a subject, since only that-which-is can be spoken of and thought of. Nor, on pain of self-contradiction, can a third path be entertained, one which would conflate being with not-being - despite the fact that just such a path is implicit in the ordinary human acceptance of an empirical world bearing a variety of shifting predicates. All references, open or covert, to not-being must be outlawed. Only '... is' (or perhaps '... is ... ') can be coherently said of anything.

The next move is to seek the characteristics of that-which-is. The total exclusion of not-being leaves us with something radically unlike the empirical world. It must lack generation, destruction, change, distinct parts, movement and an asymmetric shape, all of which would require some not-being to occur. That-which-is must, in short, be a changeless and undifferentiated sphere.

In the second part of the poem the goddess offers a cosmology - a physical explanation of the very world which the first half of the poems has banished as incoherent. This is based on a pair of ultimate principles or elements, the one light and fiery, the other heavy and dark. It is presented as convening the 'opinions of mortals'. It is deceitful, but the goddess nevertheless recommends learning it, 'so that no opinion of mortals may outstrip you.'" (p. 229)

The motive for the radical split between the two halves of the poem has been much debated in modern times. In antiquity the Way of Truth was taken by some as a challenge to the notion of change, which physics must answer, by others as the statement of a profound metaphysical truth, while the Way of Seeming was widely treated as in some sense Parmenides' own *bona fide* physical system." (Vol. VII, p. 229)

From: David Sedley, *Parmenides (early to mid 5th century B.C.)* in: Edward Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, New York: Routledge 1998.

"Parmenides expressed his ideas in a poem, but his work has been irreparably lost for at least fifteen centuries. Nothing remains of Parmenides' original Poem. The work was probably written at the end of the sixth or beginning of the fifth century B.C. Without any doubt, it was copied and recopied (always by hand) over the course of many years, but all traces of it were lost in the sixth century of our era, that is, practically a millennium after it was written by Parmenides. The last concrete reference to the book appears in the neo-Platonic philosopher Simplicius (who is known to have left Athens in 526 A.D. because the Platonic Academy was closed down).

After quoting some lines from the Poem, Simplicius explains that he is taking that liberty 'because of the rarity (*dià ten spânin*) of Parmenides' book' (*Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, p. 144)

From then on, nothing is known about Parmenides' work. (...) Attempts to reconstruct Parmenides' Poem began shortly after the Renaissance, but although they were very praiseworthy, there were classical texts still unknown at that time, and the quotations from Parmenides contained in them were not discovered until several centuries later. These attempts at reconstruction go from Henri Estienne (*Poesis philosophica*, 1573) to Hermann Diels (*Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 1903). Thanks to their work, which went on over many centuries, today we can read a good part of Parmenides' Poem. Nineteen different quotations were found (one of them translated into Latin!). These were unfortunately labeled 'fragments,' which is why, for the sake of convenience, works on Parmenides speak about 'fragment 3' or 'fragment 5'. As each fragment includes a number of lines, it is customary to write 'fr. 8.34', for example, when quoting line 34 of 'fragment' 8.

From what I have said, it can be seen that the version of Parmenides' Poem we possess is not complete. Passages that weren't quoted by anybody will remain unknown forever. Of course, the authors we use today as sources (perhaps abusively, because these authors were writing to express their own ideas, rather than to leave testimonies of other thinkers, except in the case of historians' of thought such as Theophrastus) quoted only those passages that interested them. There is nothing more subjective than a scholar's interest. A paradigmatic case is the vital Parmenides text, our present fragment 2, which postulates the existence of being, quoted for the first time by Proclus (*In Tim.* 1.345) a thousand years after it was written. Probably the discovery of the fact of being by Parmenides seemed so 'obvious' that nobody thought to quote it. Perhaps the same thing happened with other passages of the Poem; we will never know. Even so, today we possess nearly 152 lines of Parmenides, and these are an inexhaustible source of reflection. So let us take advantage of them." (pp. 12-14 notes omitted)

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

"Sextus Empiricus and Simplicius have preserved to us the most important fragments from the poems of Parmenides; for Parmenides also propounded his philosophy as a poem.

The first long fragment in Sextus (*adv. Mat.* VII, 111) is an allegorical preface to his poem on Nature. This preface is majestic; it is written after the manner of the times, and in it all there is an energetic, impetuous soul which strives with being to grasp and to express it." (Vol. I, p. 250) (...)

Since in this an advance into the region of the ideal is observable, Parmenides began Philosophy proper. A man now constitutes himself free from all ideas and opinions, denies their truth, and says necessity alone, Being, is the truth. This beginning is certainly still dim and indefinite, and we cannot say much of what it involves; but to take up this position certainly is to develop Philosophy proper, which has not hitherto existed. The dialectic that the transient has no truth, is implied in it, for if the determinations are taken as they are usually understood, contradictions ensue." (Vol. I, p. 254)

From: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1968 (reprint of 1892 edition).

Relative chronology of Parmenides and Heraclitus

External evidence.

Most of what is needful to say on this subject has been said recently with exemplary clarity by M. Marcovich.(1) Once the workings of the mind of the Hellenistic chronological versifier Apollodorus are understood, the ancient external evidence for the date of Heraclitus is seen to be mere fabrication, with no visible foundation in fact. It follows that it cannot be used to date Heraclitus before Parmenides, any more than it can be used to date Heraclitus absolutely. The date of Heraclitus must rest purely on conjecture, and his relative chronology must rest on internal evidence, for whatever such evidence may turn out to be worth. Few oddities in the history of scholarship have so piquant an irony as the still all-too-frequent reliance on the external evidence to date Parmenides after Heraclitus.

Apollodorus dated Heraclitus in the sixty-ninth Olympiad, placing his ἀκμῆ at that time. Evidence for this is to be found in Diogenes Laertius, the *Suda*, and (possibly with less accuracy) in Eusebius' Canon.(2) The form it takes in the *Suda* has apparently been responsible for some unwary theorizing. The *Suda* says, after giving Heraclitus' Olympiad, that this was in the time of Darius the son of Hystaspes. So far as I can see, it is on this basis and on no other that Jacoby, discussing this part of Apollodorus, supposed the chronologer to have derived Heraclitus' date not only from a well-known synchronism with Parmenides but also from good evidence that connected Heraclitus with this particular king of Persia. Jacoby supposed that Apollodorus for this reason fixed Heraclitus in the middle of Darius' reign. All this is baseless. No one has ever shown that any tradition of Heraclitus' connection with Darius ever existed before the forged Letters of Heraclitus or that these Letters rested on a genuine tradition of such a connection. Jacoby apparently relied upon a passage of Clement of Alexandria(3) to show the existence of such an independent tradition, but there is no reason, chronological or other, to doubt that the very learned Clement had access to the Letters or to some intermediary source. What the *Suda's* source was, we can only guess, but there is no need to postulate one earlier than, or independent of, the Letters. The Letters themselves could easily be explained as reflecting not a tradition but a forger's romantic notion, the choice of Persian king being based on—of course, the Apollodoran chronology of Heraclitus and (doubtless) of Darius the Great. The Hellenistic age sometimes (not unnaturally) expected its philosophers to be so unworldly as to refuse royal invitations and readily projected its notions into the past; the biographies of the philosophers are full of romances of this sort.

This being so, there is no shadow of a reason for supposing Apollodorus to have been motivated in his dating of Heraclitus by anything but the above-mentioned synchronism with Parmenides. Placing Xenophanes' *floruit* at the foundation date of Elea, Apollodorus no doubt recognized not only Parmenides but also Heraclitus as pupils of Xenophanes (4) and therefore placed the birth of each in the year of their master's *floruit*, giving them a *floruit* forty years later. Heraclitus was sometimes regarded as a pupil of Xenophanes, and the interval between them is duly ten Olympiads, if the majority of our sources have the correct numbering. There is no good reason to doubt that such was Apollodorus' motivation: it would be entirely consistent with what else we know of his work.

But the majority of scholars now cast doubt, and rightly so, on the Apollodoran dating of Parmenides.(5) The evidence of Plato's Parmenides shows pretty conclusively that, in the fourth century at least, Parmenides was thought to have been born about a generation later than Apollodorus reckoned; Kirk and Raven plausibly suggest a date of birth for Parmenides of "about 515-510."(6) The normal acceptance of this doctrine shows how little value is normally placed on the constructions of Apollodorus.

Yet it is still that same chronology of Apollodorus that is invoked to place Heraclitus before Parmenides. We are confronted with the ironic truth that a dating originally designed with the purpose of making these two philosophers contemporaries is now used to put one many years before the other. It has not been sufficiently observed that, if Apollodorus could be wrong by twenty-five years on Parmenides, he could be equally wrong on Heraclitus. It has not been sufficiently observed that references by Heraclitus to other writers do not serve to date him exactly and certainly do not allow us to choose between (say) 490 and (say) 485 for the composition or first dissemination of his work.(7) Nor is there any good evidence to show at what time of his life Parmenides first wrote or recited his poem.(8) For this also we cannot tell whether (say) 485 or (say) 480 is the date on which it would be safest to bet. Scholarly guessing in this particular case is worthless. So far as the external evidence goes, we do not know, and should freely admit that we do not know, whether Heraclitus wrote before Parmenides and, if he did, whether it was sufficiently before Parmenides' composition to have had any effect on him. If we are to be told these things, it will have to be on the basis of internal evidence alone.

Furthermore, that internal evidence will have to be taken from the extant remains of Parmenides and Heraclitus themselves, and of them alone. The references to Heraclitus by other writers and the imitations of Parmenides by later thinkers offer us no useful dating for the philosophical activity of either. Epicharmus? If we knew the date of the plays in question, were sure that the fragments were authentic, and also knew how long it would take Heraclitus' work to become known in Sicily and Italy, we should be able to use the evidence of Epicharmus; but we are sure of none of these things, and, if we were, we should still have to show that Epicharmus' jokes were not sufficiently comprehensible without any reference to Heraclitus—a point on which the learned differ and will

no doubt continue to differ.(9) All in all, it will be more profitable to discuss the actual argument of Parmenides and see if at any point it clearly reflects a knowledge of Heraclitus' work or doctrine. (10)" (pp. 109-111)

Notes

(1) Marcovich s.v. Herakleitos, cols. 247ff.

(2) D. L. 9.1, *Suda* s.v. *Ἡράκλειτος*, Euseb. *Chron.* s. Ol. 70.1 (for variants see Jacoby, *Apollodors Chronik*, Berlin 1902, p. 229 n. 4).

(3) Clem. Al., *Strom.* 1.65.4 (p. 41 Stahlin-Fruchtel), see Jacoby, *Apollodors Chronik*, p. 228 n. 3. Jacoby himself demolishes Bernays' contentions that Epictetus referred to Heraclitus' connection with Darius at *Ench.* 21 W., that Eudemus referred to it also, and that it was probably in any case historical. Most of what Bernays said on this topic (*Die Heraklitischen Briefe*, Berlin 1869, pp. 13f) is uncharacteristically in the air. Zeller (*Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, I Teil, Leipzig, 1919-20, p. 914 n. 2), admitting that Bernays' remarks did not make the Persian invitation to Heraclitus more than a possibility, suggested that the forged letters proved the story known beforehand to their author. A clear *non sequitur*, surprisingly accepted by Kirk, *Heraclitus, The Cosmic Fragments*, Cambridge 1954 p. 1. Heinemann at RE Suppl. 5 col. 229 plausibly suggested that the tale of Darius' invitation to Heraclitus was an imitation of the late story concerning Diogenes and Alexander the Great, for which the first extant source is Cicero (see Natorp at RE 5 col. 767)."

(4) Cf Sotion ap. D. L. 9.5. and *Suda* s.v. *Ἡράκλειτος* (cited by Jacoby).

(5) To take only English examples, see Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 4th edition, London 1930 pp. 169f; Kirk and Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* 2nd impression, Cambridge 1960 (much more cautiously) pp. 263 f.; Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Cambridge 1962, vol. II pp. If.

(6) See last note; Jacoby was prepared (*Apollodors Chronik*, p. 233) to stretch the limit for Parmenides' birth as far back as 520; I know nothing solid against this.

(7) Marcovich (s.v. *Herakleitos*, cols. 248f) remarks with justice that Ion of Chios and the vaticinium post eventum of *Letter 4* supply termini ante quem to place Heraclitus at any rate in the first half of the fifth century. But whether Heraclitus' interest in Pythagoras and Hecataeus is sufficient to place his activity around 490 is doubtful: both these thinkers were the object of much interest later in the century, and we are in no position on this account to rule out a date for Heraclitus' writing as late as (say) 480.

(8) The suggestion (e.g., Kirk and Raven p. 268) that the goddess' address to Parmenides as *κουρε* dates the poem in Parmenides' youth is rash; see Taran, *Parmenides*, Princeton 1965, p. 16.

(9) For bibliography see Marcovich s.v. *Herakleitos*, col. 249.

(10) This procedure is in effect followed by Calogero, *Eraclito*, at *Giornale Critico della Filosofia Italiana* 4 (1936) 195, who accepts that Heraclitus and Parmenides were contemporaries, if not coevals.

From: Michael C. Stokes, *One and Many in Presocratic Philosophy*, Washington, D.C., Center for Hellenic Studies 1971.

Ontological questions in Parmenides' Poem

"If we are to examine Parmenides' reasoning profitably, an indispensable preliminary is to establish at least a provisional reading for the Greek words translated "is" or "it is" (*esti*), "what is" or "being" (*on, to on*), "to be" (*einai*). For while it is evident enough that in his poem Parmenides purports to be delivering an insight of the utmost significance concerning to *eon* (as he calls it), still the construction which he puts upon the term and its cognates, and the understanding which he expects of his listener, are not so clear and have been topics of dispute.

Especially notable, and often noted, is the fact that Parmenides' discussion of 'being' shows no sign of the conceptual distinction considered elementary nowadays, between the "is" linking subject and predicate and the "is" of existence; and in fact it needs no documentation here that this distinction was not reflected in either ordinary or philosophical Greek idiom until, at least, a much later date

than his, the word *esti* expressing both concepts. Also highly visible in the poem is the abundance of occurrences of *esti* used absolutely, unaccompanied by any predicate expression. As a result of this last, the poem can create in the contemporary reader the impression that to eon is being used to mean 'what is' in the existential sense only, to mean what there is; indeed some students of the poem conclude not only that Parmenides is unwittingly confining himself to the existential meaning, but even that his confusion on this score is responsible for his entire doctrine. (2)

Such scant basis as there is for the latter idea will be adequately treated below; (3) but it is important to understand from the outset that the notion of 'being' studied by Parmenides and by early Greek philosophy in general, is not 'confined' to either of our two distinct concepts, that of existence and that of being something-or-other in the sense of having such-and-such properties (being a man, being green); rather, these notions are impacted or *fused* in the early Greek concept of being. A result is that a Greek inquiry *ti to on*, 'what is being?', frequently must be interpreted as concerned simultaneously with the concepts of being = existence and of 'being Φ ' for variable Φ . To approach a Greek thinker, even as late as Aristotle, without keeping this in mind is to risk serious misunderstanding of his concerns.

This fusion of the ideas of existence and of being-of-a-certain-sort does not merely show itself in the early use of the word *esti*, but seems to be part of a more general situation having other manifestations also; these have such close bearings on the interpretation of Parmenides that the matter should be explored a little further. First let us recall -- what has often been pointed out -- tendency in ancient philosophy, (a) to take as the ideal or paradigm form of fact-stating assertion the ascription of a property to an object, and the further tendency (b) to take as the ideal or paradigm form of ascription of a property to an object the use of a subject-predicate sentence with subject and predicate linked by the copula. (5) In this way the predicative use of *esti* can come to be thought of as paradigmatic for asserting that anything at all is the case, or obtains. And once we see this we can discern a considerable variety of assimilations at points where nowadays it is customary to make distinctions; thus, a running together of

1a) being-the case (*on*) with (1b) existence (*on*),

2a) facts (*pragmata, tynchanonta, etc.*) with (2b) objects (*pragmata, tynchanonta, etc.*)

3a) coming-to-be (the case) (*gigenesthai*) with (3b) coming-to-be (= coming to exist) (*gignesthai*).

Parallel to the fusion of the notions of fact and object as items of the world, is a tendency at the semantical level to run together properties of sentences with properties of singular and general terms. Here the common element is an expression's 'corresponding (or failing to correspond) to something that is' in the two senses of "is"; thus *truth* for sentences, describing what is (the case), can tend to fuse with *applying to something* for singular and general terms, denoting something that is (= exists), and conversely falsehood for sentences tends to merge with failure to apply to anything for terms. In this case the assimilation is rather conceptual than fully visible in the vocabulary; for example, terms (*onomata*) that apply to or denote something are not for this reason (6) called "true" (*alethe*); the fusion is evidenced when the notions are being explained: thus truth as 'saying, indicating in speech, that which is,' and falsehood as 'saying, indicating in speech, that which is not.' In these terms we can put the assimilation in this way:

4a) saying, indicating in speech, that which is (= stating truly) with (4b) saying, indicating in speech, that which is (designating something that exists),

5a) saying, indicating in speech, that which is not (= stating falsely) with (5b) saying, indicating in speech, that which is not (= designating something that does not exist)." (pp. 112-114, notes omitted)

From: Montgomery Furth, "Elements of Eleatic Ontology," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 1968, pp. 111-132.

The uniqueness of Being according to Parmenides

"Having pursued Parmenides' argument to the end, we may now pause to consider the function within it of the predicate $\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ applied to Being at the opening of the argument. We have observed that it is not a predicate that is formally announced as requiring proof. The nearest Parmenides comes to putting this predicate in the programme is to say that (8.4) the subject is $\mu\omicron\nu\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$, unique of its kind, or (quite simply) unique, single. But he nowhere devotes a separate paragraph to the proof of

its μουννογενής nature alone. So much there is to be said for Cornford's assertion that Parmenides does not prove his Being to be one. (115) Where Parmenides does, however, prove it is in the middle of a paragraph (8.34ff) ostensibly aimed at proving that the only thought is the thought of the subject's existence, and it is the immediate premiss from which that conclusion is deduced. The subject's singleness is proved from another predicate (ούλον) in its turn derivable from the original decision to speak or think of nothing save one thing, namely, what is. The assertion that Being is one is for Parmenides the statement that it is alone and single. This statement he bases on the assumption that one can think of nothing else, which in turn is based on the assertion that there is nothing else there to be thought of. Parmenides recognizes that the oneness of Being in this sense is an intermediate stage in his argument when he summarizes the thought of his opening denial of becoming by saying that "it was once" and "it will be" are inapplicable, since it is now all together, one and continuous, and when he goes on to argue at 8.22ff, as a necessary supplement to the argument against becoming, that it is indivisible and continuous. That Being is single follows from the fact that it is ούλον and συνεχες, that there is nothing else. That it will remain single and unique is the result of its being unchanging and unmoving; but it must be unchanging and unmoving because there is nothing else for it to change into and no other place for it to move to. The singleness of Being is central to the argument and depends in its turn directly on the original disjunction εστιν η ουκ εστιν. It depends on the doctrine that you cannot talk or think about the non-existent and therefore cannot discourse about anything other than the existent. The only place where the impossibility of anything other than the existent is explicit is at 8.36ff, but it is nevertheless an important, indeed a cardinal, point.

Nowhere in the poem does Parmenides start from "what is one" and deduce anything about its nature; he appears to be doing so in the opening demolition of becoming and perishing, but this is illusory, in that Being's singleness is dependent in turn on the negation of nonexistence. Further, Parmenides has nothing to say about "plurality" arising from unity. He would agree (or indeed argue) that his subject is one and cannot become many, but it is not in virtue of its unity that it cannot become many. It cannot become many, he would agree, because there never will be more than one thing; and there never will be more than one thing because that would infringe the rule that only Being can be thought of, and nothing else, either now or at any other time. Even if at B8.22 the denial of divisibility were a denial that the subject can become many, the reason given is not that it is one but that it is, all in a like degree. To say this is not to state that Parmenides would have agreed that what is one can become many-- he would have excluded this or any other kind of becoming. It needs still to be said that Parmenides is concerned with becoming in general and that there is no reason in his text to suppose that the specific kind of becoming in which a unity gives rise to a plurality ever entered his head. Previous thought might have given him the idea, but his poem shows, and in logic need show, no trace of it whatever.

Nor does Parmenides show that what is one cannot be many.¹¹⁶ For again, if ούλον, συνεχες, εν, μουννογενες, ου διαιρετον, ταύτον, and so forth constitute a denial of plurality, as they do, it is still not in virtue of its initial unity that Parmenides' subject has these predicates hung on it but in virtue of its own existence, as being the only thing that can be talked or thought about. It is not so much that what is one cannot be many (though Parmenides would certainly have agreed, if pressed, that it cannot) as that what is must be one, single, continuous whole. Again, Parmenides does not start from unity. As long as in παν εστιν ομοιον the word ομοιον was taken adjectivally, there was some sort of case for supposing that line to infer the negation of plurality from the assertion of unity. But the case even then was not strong; for, though ομοιον is in Aristotle a kind of εν, the two words are not interchangeable in Presocratic thought. Further, if ομοιον be adjectival and equivalent here in Parmenides' mind to εν, one would still have to search for the argument that led Parmenides to postulate the unity (in this sense) of his subject. Parmenides would then be found guilty of proceeding from the proposition that the subject all is (παμπαν line 11) to the statement that it is all alike. The basis for this could of course be the original κρίσις; the abolition of difference being equated with the abolition of not-Being. But this interpretation, apart from ignoring the stylistic difficulties of taking ομοιον adjectivally, would have the philosophical disadvantage of making Parmenides less explicit and harder to follow. And, even if one followed it, one would still, it seems, be compelled to admit that unity was not an assumption for Parmenides but something he thought he had proved. One would also have to admit that Parmenides was not specially concerned to prove that what was one in general could not be many but was rather seeking to show that his subject in particular, since it was one, could not be many. There should therefore be no more heard of the hypothesis that Parmenides proved that what was one (in the sense of being homogeneous) could

not have gaps in it and thus be many. It will be observed in subsequent chapters that, if Parmenides' successors did find such a proof in his text, at any rate they ignored it.

It is important in this context to notice that Parmenides did not have to prove in particular that what was one could not become many, or that homogeneity could not give rise to a varied multiplicity, in order to invalidate cosmogonies of the type produced by his Ionian predecessors. There is no reason to suppose that he had them specially in mind; but, even if he had, his general argument refutes them along with the rest of mankind. For, to make a varied world arise from a substantially homogeneous beginning, clearly something must change, or homogeneity will be the only result. So that, quite apart from the Parmenidean wholesale rejection of the world perceived by the senses, a cosmogony of the Ionian kind was impossible. If becoming and perishing went, this sort of cosmogony went with them. Parmenides, even if he were specially concerned with his Milesian predecessors, and even if they had enunciated the principle that one thing could be or become many things, did not have to oppose them on that particular ground." (pp. 141-143)

From: Michael Stokes, *One and Many in Presocratic Philosophy*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1971.

Aristotle's criticism of Eleatic philosophy

"The criticism of the Eleatic unity of Being is highly instructive for the study of the method by which Aristotle built up his own doctrine of matter; and the very inclusion of the critique in the *Physics* shows that he was conscious of the logical character of the origin of his theory.

He first attacks the concept of Being from the point of view of the categories, (259) showing that, if it is substance, quality, and quantity, it is many and, if it be all quantity or quality, the axiom that only substance is separable is violated. The truth of this principle is indicated by the fact that everything is predicated of substance as subject, an example of the grammatical orientation of Aristotle's thought which determines the whole passage.

Since Melissus called Being infinite, he must have considered it to be a quantity since this is the category in which infinity occurs; (260) and, if it is both substantial and quantitative, it is two, not one; while, if it is substantial alone, it cannot be infinite or have any magnitude.

Since the notion of the unity of Being collides with the doctrine of the categories, Aristotle next examines the possible meaning of "one" as applied to Being. (261) Of the three possible interpretations of Eleatic unity-continuity, indivisibility, unity of definition or essence-the first would result in multiplicity since the continuous is infinitely divisible and would also raise the question concerning the part and the whole, for discontinuous parts taken in themselves, if identical with the whole, would be identical with one another. If this unity be that of indivisibility, there will be no quantity or quality and Being will be neither infinite with Melissus nor finite with Parmenides. And, if the unity is unity of definition, the Eleatics will arrive at the conclusion of Heraclitus that all things are identical, and their theory will be concerned not with the unity of Being but with its non-existence and the identity of quality and quantity. (pp. 63-64)

(...)

The general critique of the Eleatics is followed by a special refutation of Melissus and Parmenides (p. 67)

(...)

At the beginning of the specific criticism of Parmenides (296) Aristotle says that the same type of argument is valid against him, a statement which confutes the notion that Aristotle supposed the "Being" of Parmenides and Melissus to have been differently conceived. (297) Parmenides falsely assumed that "Being" is an absolute concept whereas it really is ambiguous; he then argued falsely because he did not see that even an inseparable predicate is essentially different from the subject of which it is predicated. This explanation of the error of Parmenides is equivalent to the logical critique of Plato's *Sophist*; but here the language of Aristotle's correction is accommodated to his own physical terminology, and the way is prepared for a transition from the theory of predication, which is the result of the Eleatic criticism in the *Sophist*, to the doctrine of substrate and inhering accident. Aristotle implies that ignorance of the logic of predication led Parmenides to a mistaken notion of the physical world. The concept of Being as held by Parmenides is then subjected to a criticism which, by the process of showing that it will not fit into a logical proposition, is intended

to prove that it cannot represent anything. If this Parmenidean Being is substantial Being and substantial Unity, it cannot be predicated of any subject since such a subject would be non-existent if " Being " were not an equivocal term; but neither can it act as subject, for, if anything else were predicated of it, the predicated attribute would have to be non-Being and non-Being would then be predicated of Being. Aristotle tacitly assumes that Parmenides would have to think of Being as an element in a proposition; he fails to consider the possibility that Parmenides may have fallen into error just because, having envisaged the concept of transcendental Being, he denied the possibility of existence on any lower scale. Aristotle, in trying to press the Parmenidean " Being " into service in the physical world and in rejecting its possibility because it cannot fulfil such service, is guilty of the same kind of error as Parmenides was, for he too assumes that the concept of Being must be fitted to one scale only. But his conclusion is the contrary of that of Parmenides in that he holds to the exclusive reality of phenomenal Being which Parmenides completely rejected.(298)

When Aristotle proceeds to the objection that substantial Being cannot have magnitude because as magnitude it would have parts which must then be essentially different from one another, he is using an argument resting finally on his doctrine of categories and considering the Eleatic Being as a spatial continuum equivalent to the substantial infinity which he attributes to the Pythagoreans and against which he uses the same argument.(299) The same doctrine derived from the categories forms the transition from the refutation of the possibility of the Eleatic Being as spatially continuous unity to that of its interpretation as essential and indivisible unity. Being, as substantial, must consist of parts which are themselves substantial, as is proved by the definition of such a thing.(300) That the elements of the definition cannot be accidental attributes rests upon the axiom that substance itself cannot be an attribute of any subject; and this axiom depends finally upon the exclusive character of the categories. The implication for the Eleatics is that, whatever is meant by their Being, it must, as a substantial existence, be defined by other substances which fact destroys its presumed unity.(301) But here again Being for Aristotle is conceivable only as phenomenal, for substance and propositional subject are treated as equivalent and exhaustive." The Eleatic argument (302) seemed cogent to some people who felt constrained thereby to admit the necessity for the existence of non-Being and to posit atomic magnitudes.(303) But, Aristotle says, even if *Being* is unequivocal, nothing prevents non-Being from existing, not as absolute non-Being but as "not being a particular thing." For Being in and for itself is simply substantial Being which may be manifold. There is throughout this critique an apparent confusion of logical and physical concepts which is due to the dependence of Aristotle's physics upon his logic. At one time he said that the Eleatic error was due to the ignorance of the meaning of relative or *accidental* non-Being,(304) that is of logical privation which is the essence of the negative proposition; but such a concept, which in its Platonic origin was simply logical, is at once transformed into a physical doctrine by Aristotle, so that he can say shortly thereafter that an understanding of the nature of substrate would have solved the difficulties of the Eleatics.(305) Privation is, in effect, the immediate material of generation (306) and the logical subject of privation is transmuted by means of the concomitant potentiality into the physical substrate.(307) The notion that privation of a quality requires in the substrate the potential presence of that quality is a rule of logic (308) transferred to descriptive physics. It is this connection of the matter of generation and of thought, this equivalence of the proposition of logic and the description of physical change which makes Aristotle think the Physics an appropriate place to discuss the Eleatic doctrine which on his own reckoning falls outside the sphere of physics." (pp. 72-76)

Notes

(259) *Physics* 185 A 20-B 5.

(260) Cf. page 23, note 85, 2 *supra*.

(261) *Physics* 185 B 5.186 A 3. Cf. for the different meanings of " things called one in and for themselves," *Metaphysics* 1015 B 36-1017 A 2.

(296) *Physics* 186 A 22-B 35.

(297) Ross in his commentary on the *Metaphysics*, 986 B 19, Vol. I, p. 153, supposes that Aristotle made a distinction with regard to the subject-matter and treatment of Parmenides and Melissus (cf. page 67, note 273 *supra*) ; such a distinction, however, occurs only in the *Metaphysics* and for a particular purpose (cf. page 220, note 15 *infra*),

(298) It is not necessary to assume that Parmenides had clearly conceived transcendental Being in itself; Aristotle himself had an inkling that Parmenides was trying to get at something essentially different from phenomenal existence (cf. page 66, note 270 *supra*), and Plato's frequently expressed respect for the Eleatic doctrine seems to be due to his feeling that it really aimed at the static certainty of the super-phenomenal world (e.g. *Theaetetus* 183 E 3 ff.). It is enough, for the moment, to understand that the Eleatics were stressing the immutable reality which is manifested in thought and the objects of thought as opposed to the instability of physical phenomena, and that, in the manner of those who make a startling discovery, they reserved to the new concept the sole right to consideration. But it is not impossible that they should still have considered this transcendental Being as somehow physical, though they certainly held it to be different from anything perceptible.

(299) See pages 24-25 *supra*.

(300) Aristotle's own solution is that no universal term has substantial existence, cf. *Metaphysics* 1041 A 3-5. But the argument only proves that the Eleatic Being is indefinable and transcendent; not that there is no transcendent Being. The Eleatics might well have used Aristotle's own admission that Being "runs through all the categories" (*Metaphysics* Gamma, chap. 2) to prove that merely because the concept will not fit into any one of the categories one cannot argue that it does not exist or that it is meaningless.

(301) The origin of Aristotle's criticism is clearly Plato, *Sophist* 245 B-D; but the presumption of the doctrine of categories has restricted the application of the critique to physical existence. It is strange that Aristotle failed to see the similarity of the Eleatic Being and his own God in respect of the problems of existence. Reflection upon this similarity should have made it apparent that any attempt to apply the categories to Eleatic Being must miss the fundamental motive of the conception.

(302) *Physics* 187 A 1-10.

(303) The Greek commentators, Simplicius, Themistius, Philoponus, Alexander, understood the sentence to refer to Plato and Xenocrates, the first of whom is then charged with positing non-Being in answer to Parmenides, the second with setting up indivisible lines. Further, the two Eleatic arguments are divided, the first being given to Parmenides, the second (by Simplicius, Themistius, Philoponus) being identified with Zeno's first paradox. But since Plato posits absolute non-Being no more than does Aristotle (cf. Plato, *Sophist* 258 A 11B 3; D 7-E 3; E 6 ff.), since Aristotle does not use *ατομα μεγεθη* specifically for Xenocrates' *ατομοι γραμμαι*, and since he represents the two Eleatic arguments as the incentives to the Atomic theory of Leucippus (cf. *De Generatione* 325 A 2 ff., especially 26-29), it seems certain that the *εννοιαι* of the present passage are the Atomists. (For the other view see Robin, *La Théorie Platonicienne des Idées et des Nombres*, note 272, IV, pp. 300 ff.)

The second Eleatic argument here mentioned, the dichotomy, was referred by Porphyry to Parmenides; since the simple term is used by Aristotle of Zeno's first paradox (*Physics* 239 B 22), it is most likely to refer to the same argument here, although it has not previously been mentioned in this passage.

In *Metaphysics* 1089 A 2-6 Aristotle refers to some who made the "indeterminate dyad" an element in the generation of things, influenced by the argument of Parmenides to prove that non-Being exists. Ross suggests that he has in mind such passages as *Sophist* 237 A, 256 E, 241 D. In that case he overlooks the limitations *η θατερου φυσις, κατα τι, πη* in these passages which make the sense equivalent to his own *ον τι ειναι το μη ον*.

(304) *Physics* 191 B 13-16.

(305) *Physics* 191 B 33-34.

(306) *Physics* 191 B 15-16. Yet 191 B 35 ff. he reproaches the Platonists for making matter "non-Being" and claims himself to differentiate privation and matter.

(307) The transformation is carried so far that *στερηρησις* becomes, instead of simple negation of form, a positive reality, a kind of form itself (*Physics* 193 B 19-20). Cf. Baeumker, *Problem der Materie*, pp. 218-219.

(308) Cf. its use in *Topics* 148 A 3-9. It is a mistake to define a thing by privation of that which is not potentially predicable of it. The logical basis of the physical doctrine, as well as some of the difficulties involved in the development, is to be seen in *Metaphysics* 1055 A 33-B 29.

From: Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press 1935 (reprint: New York: Octagon Books, 1964).