

*Parmenides by himself***Néstor-Luis Cordero**

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ABSTRACT: In order to know the thought of a philosopher the surest method is to read what he wrote. In the case of the Presocratics, however, a direct unmediated reading of the texts is almost impossible, because the vast majority of works of this period have disappeared. We propose the following methodological procedure concerning the Presocratics in general, and Parmenides in particular: Once a recovered citation (“fragment”) is confirmed as authentic, one must first attach oneself to it and try to pull from it the richest possible meaning. Only by this procedure can one understand the author on his own. The second step is to search for whether there are in a commentator some elements in accordance with the original text that are capable of enriching it.

We first consider Parmenides in his philosophical *milieu*, then outline the contents of the recovered fragments of his *Poem*. A Parmenides emerges who differs in many fundamental respects from that portrayed by Aristotle and his school. From an analysis of these fragments unburdened by Aristotelico-Simplician assumptions, we propose a new reading order for the fragments.

KEY-WORDS: Parmenides, reception, Aristotle, Simplicius, *doxa*, fact of being, reading order, didactic poetry.

RÉSUMÉ: Pour connaître la pensée d'un philosophe, la méthode la plus sûre est de lire ce qu'il a écrit. Dans le cas des présocratiques, cependant, une lecture directe et sans intermédiaire des textes est presque impossible, car la grande majorité des œuvres de cette période ont disparu. Nous proposons la procédure méthodologique suivante concernant les présocratiques en général, et Parménide en particulier : Une fois qu'une citation retrouvée (« fragment ») est confirmée comme authentique, il faut d'abord s'y attacher et essayer d'en tirer le sens le plus riche possible. Ce n'est que par cette procédure que l'on peut comprendre l'auteur par lui-même. La deuxième étape consiste à rechercher s'il y a dans un commentateur des éléments conformes au texte original qui sont susceptibles de l'enrichir.

Dans ce travail, nous considérons d'abord Parménide dans son milieu philosophique, puis nous exposons le contenu des fragments retrouvés de son *Poème*. Il en ressort un Parménide qui diffère à bien des égards fondamentaux de celui dépeint par Aristote et son école. À partir de l'analyse de ces fragments, débarrassés des hypothèses aristotéliennes et simpliciennes, nous proposons un nouvel ordre de lecture des fragments.

MOTS-CLÉ: Parménide, réception, Aristote, Simplicius, *doxa*, le fait d'être, ordre de lecture, poésie didactique.

The philosophy called “Presocratic,” like certain alcoholic beverages, must be consumed in moderation; it is necessary to take some precautions. The justification for this warning is clear: In order to know the thought of a philosopher the surest and most infallible method consists in reading what he wrote. But in the case of the Presocratics, a direct unmediated reading of the texts is a task that is almost impossible to accomplish, because apart from a few exceptional cases, the works of this period tend to have disappeared¹ Fortunately, at least since the sixteenth century, the careful and laborious work of philologists² has succeeded in extracting, from a whole series of ancient works preserving quotations of lost works, those of the Presocratics. These veritable relics, *morceaux choisis* (pieces selected) by the authors of antiquity, from Plato to Simplicius, in order to insert them, for very different reasons, into their own works, are the material upon which the researcher interested in the thought of the Presocratics must work.

But if we have put forward that the study of recovered quotations of the Presocratics (known as “fragments”) must be considered with certain precautions it is because, given their sometimes very limited number (four lines of Anaximander, three of Anaximenes), it is often necessary to call upon commentators to “shed light on” these fragmentary texts. And then a veritable Greek tragedy begins to be set up, because, as the profession of “historian of philosophy” did not exist,³ the commentator, who generally belongs to a particular movement or

¹ The only authentic texts we possess are the “Strasbourg papyrus” of Empedocles; a few columns (very damaged) of a treatise of Antiphon; and some versions, of dubious authenticity, of a few speeches of Gorgias.

² In the case of some Presocratics, starting from Henri Estienne in *Poesis philosophica* (Geneva, 1573).

³ In spite of the probable title of his book, Φυσικὰ δόξαι (or Φυσικὰ ἱστορία, as one reads in Simplicius, *In Phys.* 115.12), the work of Theophrastus presents the Aristotelian interpretation of the first philosophers. On the other hand, the *Vitae* of Diogenes Laertius could be the oldest instance of a “history of philosophy” in today’s sense of the word.

branch of philosophy, “interprets” and “comments upon” a text (one written, in most cases, some decades or even some centuries earlier⁴), in accordance with the potential heritage of philosophy, that is to say, of what one supposes that hypothetical successors have inherited from him. The most obvious case is that of Plato, who interprets Heraclitus in accordance with the mobilism of Cratylus; and Parmenides, inserted into a dubious “Eleatic race” (*Sophist*, 242d), will have the same tragic destiny.

Methodological Precaution

Our methodological precaution concerning the Presocratics in general, and Parmenides in particular, is the following. Once the recovered citation (the “fragment”) is confirmed as authentic, even if it is only a few words, *one must attach oneself to it, become its slave, try to pull from it the richest possible meaning*. This procedure, which can sometimes prove to be very limited (fortunately this is not the case with Parmenides), is the only one that will allow us to understand the author *on his own*, and to avoid anachronisms. And, only *in a second step*, we can permit ourselves to search for whether there are in a commentator some elements, always in accordance with the original text, that are capable of enriching it. In short, it is the original text that confirms the pertinence of a commentary; it is not the commentary that “sheds light on” an original text.

Despite our methodological precaution we cannot deny that the ancient commentators had at least two advantages that we do not possess: (a) proximity in time to the author commented upon (even if the commentator’s era is sometimes quite far from that of the philosopher, it is still closer to his than is our own postmodernity), and (b) complete awareness of the philosopher’s work or works. Concerning

⁴ Over a millennium separates Parmenides from his principal citer Simplicius.

point (a), paradoxically, our remove from the philosophers of the past guarantees a kind of objectivity, which allows us to look at an authentic text without being involved in the disputes among the schools, as was the case for the Ancients. Concerning point (b), it is clear that our knowledge of the works lost is partial, but (b') the excerpts cited by the "sources", owing to the fact that they are *morceaux choisis* (pieces selected), undoubtedly represent the most important passages of the lost work. It is difficult to imagine that a thesis or a crucial passage in a work had not attracted the attention of someone who was dealing with a philosopher and who had decided to cite him; and (b'') it would also be unimaginable that in the uncited passages of his book — thus, those lost forever — the philosopher had maintained theses contrary to those that we find in the cited passages. The citations preserved are, in our view, a faithful representation — albeit fragmentary — of the true character of the philosophy of the author, such as the citer (sometimes incorrectly) has understood it.

*A minor risk: interpreting a philosopher
in accordance with his contemporaries*

The least anachronistic way to try to understand the thought of a philosopher involves studying his relationship with his contemporaries, and sometimes with those who preceded him by a few years, for it is in that intellectual atmosphere that his philosophy locates itself. The best way of understanding atomism, Zeno's paradoxes, and Melissus' assimilation of void (empty space) to nothingness, consists in establishing the relationships that undoubtedly exist between the three schools, very closely grouped in time, instead of placing them in Aristotelian categories of thought. This diagnostic is appropriate especially in the case of thinkers who philosophized before the veritable tsunami represented by the sophists, who radically altered the face of

philosophy. This is because owing to the fact that it criticized the already “classic” manner of philosophizing, Sophistic introduced some new perspectives and, especially, compelled the “new” philosophers (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, etc.) to reform philosophy, to propose a way of getting beyond relativism, and to try to recover in the “ancients” the few certainties that had escaped the tsunami, but which certainly *they* interpret already in an anachronistic manner, post-sophistically, and the problems begin in consequence of the loss of contemporaneity.

Of Socrates, alas, we know nothing; but for a start the testimonies that make of him someone interested in knowing what this is, or what that is, suggest that his perspective was fairly oriented toward knowledge, and certainly toward the ethico-political reverberations that it had on society. Witnesses in his time make of him someone who aimed to reach definitions, especially of values, definitions that went beyond subjective responses. Plato, for his part, has a rather equivocal attitude with regard to the past. In a classic passage of the *Sophist*, he says that the philosophers of the past “told us a sort of myth, as if we were children” (241c); but a few pages later he relies on the two gains from earlier thought, permanence and change, in order to propose his new ontology that stakes a claim for the dynamic character of the Forms. But in his rare citations of philosophers of earlier generations, Plato cannot help but comment upon (and criticize) certain ideas, depending on what they became among the supposed inheritors of the “masters,” who are his contemporaries. Thus, as we have already noted, Heraclitus is interpreted in accordance with Cratylus, and Parmenides, in the *Sophist*, is interpreted according to the adaptation of his philosophy made by Melissus, who placed the Parmenidean fact of being (ἐόν)⁵ in space and in time.

The attitude with regard to the thinkers of the past will change radically with Aristotle. They are all, from Thales to Democritus,

⁵ Cf. our translation of the *Sophist* (GF-Flammarion, Paris, 1993), especially p. 244, n. 208.

considered according to what they said, or did not say, concerning the ἀρχαί and the elements, either regarding their quality or their quantity. Aristotle does not ask himself whether they are interested in the principles; for him, that goes without saying: “it is *clear* that those who philosophized (φιλοσοφέσαντας) about the truth, stated certain principles and certain causes (ἀρχάς τινας καὶ αἰτίας)” (*Met.* A.III. 983b2). And as from the Platonic systematization (which Aristotle accepts) it is necessary to account for the sensible as much as the intelligible, the philosophers of the past are considered anachronistically according to their responses to that question. We will see that Parmenides did not escape that tragedy.

But Aristotle’s little snowball became an avalanche that swept away the whole group of the first philosophers, carrying them away by means of the imposing mass of the doxography which, starting from Aristotle, was reinforced thanks to Theophrastus and his successors, up through Simplicius. It is in this way that, a millennium after his death, Simplicius writes of Parmenides, who had not even dreamed of the notion of ἀρχή, much less of the Platonic dichotomy sensible/intelligible, that “he too set down (ἔθετο), as fundamental principles (ἀρχάς...στοιχειώδεις) of things that come to be (τῶν γενητῶν), the primary opposition, which he calls light and darkness” (*In Phys.* 30.20). We will try to show that in this case, it would be necessary to say, as in certain films, that all resemblance to reality is only a coincidence... But this picture, which has made Parmenides an unknown, has established itself in an overwhelming manner in the histories of philosophy.

Parmenides by himself

Can one put forward another Parmenides against this Parmenides, victim of the Aristotelico-Simplician avalanche? Clearly. All one needs to do is to read Parmenides on his own and to look at the nineteen citations from his *Poem* that have been recovered without

taking account of the commentaries that want to find in him responses to questions that he had not asked himself. Nevertheless, even this procedure which, *a priori*, is almost a matter of common sense, must overcome an obstacle. This potential obstacle is the following: apart from the rare fragments cited by Plato, the citations recovered from *all* the Presocratics (Parmenides included) are found in a few cases in Aristotle and most cases particularly in the doxographers who, directly or indirectly, depend on Aristotle. Now, in general, the citer could not help but to comment upon and to interpret the text that he transcribed through an Aristotelian lens. This is the case for Parmenides, where the Aristotelian interpretation appears everywhere, directly or indirectly. The work of the researcher then entails separating in a surgical fashion the citation from the interpretation, even if the latter might seem relevant, and giving preference to the authentic words of the philosopher. The task is not impossible.

Parmenides in his atmosphere

If we look at some features of three philosophers who were very different, but who breathed the same “presocratic” atmosphere and who were close to one another in time, namely Xenophanes, Heraclitus, and Parmenides, we see that the Aristotelico-Simplician tradition, already distant from that atmosphere, seems not to have grasped the two principal features of the *Poem* of Parmenides, which he shares with the philosophers just cited (this does not assume a direct acquaintance with those authors on Parmenides’ part⁶): (a) his eminently didactic character and (b) his critique of theories about reality that differ from his own. If

⁶ On the Xenophanes-Parmenides relationship, see our articles “Simplicius et l’‘école’ éléate,” in *Simplicius, sa vie, son oeuvre, sa survie*, éd. Hadot, I. (Berlin/New York: Walther de Gruyter, 1987), 166–182; and “L’invention de l’école éléatique (Platon, *Sophiste*, 242d),” in *Études sur le “Sophiste” de Platon*, éd. P. Aubenque (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1991) 91–124.

Parmenides chose epic hexameter for expressing himself, and gave his *Poem* the structure of a philosophy lesson,⁷ it was in order to reach a public wider than those who could be interested in a treatise, and due to his desire to communicate the truths that he was proud of having found. Yet neither in Aristotle nor in the commentators did this didactic aspect of the *Poem* earn the importance that it deserves. Proclus, for example, wrote that “the use of the poetic genre deprives it of clarity” (*in Platonis Timaeum commentaria* I.345.12), and Aristotle often accuses Parmenides of making “eristic syllogisms” (*Physics* I.3.186a7). Clearly, Parmenides was not conversant with the syllogistic of Aristotle...

The other feature of Parmenides’ thought overlooked by the Aristotelico-Simplician tradition is also connected to the didactic character of the *Poem*: the critique of a way of philosophizing that is erroneous, but which one must be familiar with in order not to adopt it. In fact, Parmenides describes in a very vitriolic manner the builders of a way of thinking that is only a set of “opinions” (δόξαι), and, in a kind of “program of study” that must see through to success the one who wants to become a “man who knows” (fr. 1.3), he even uses the notion of necessity: “It is necessary (Χρεῶν) to inquire about everything” (fr. 1.28). Now, a short time before Parmenides,⁸ Xenophanes had adopted the same thought pattern, and, at almost the same time as Parmenides, Heraclitus did so as well. Already in Xenophanes there had been a critique of the “mortals” (βροτοί⁹) who “believe (δοκέουσι, verb related to δόξα) that the gods are born” (fr. 14), because men “fabricated opinions (δόκος) on all things” (fr. 34.4). To this erroneous

⁷ On this subject see our work “La Déesse de Parménide, maîtresse de philosophie,” in *La naissance de la raison en Grèce*, J.F. Mattéi (ed.), PUF, 1990.

⁸ Diogenes Laertius, undoubtedly in accordance with the *Chronica* of Apollodorus, says that Heraclitus and Parmenides were at their *akmé* during the 69th Olympiad.

⁹ The same word appears in Parmenides (fr. 1.31, 8.52).

interpretation concerning divinity, Xenophanes opposes his own conception, free of any kind of anthropomorphism (fr. 23 and fr. 24).

The case of Heraclitus is more radical, as he builds his philosophy as a critique, at once of earlier philosophers and of the crowd in general. Concerning his predecessors, what Heraclitus says in fragment 40 is a veritable declaration of principles: “The abundance of knowledge (πολυμαθία) does not teach intelligence, for otherwise, it would have taught (ἐδίδαξε) Hesiod and Pythagoras, and again Xenophanes and Hecataeus.” And, concerning the many, the crowd, it is as if asleep: “For the people who are awake there is a single universe; but for those who are asleep there is a private universe” (fr. 89). They are slaves of opinions that are only “children’s games” (fr. 70), and even the most renowned individual is the victim of what is said: “The most famous (δοκιμώτατος) knows and protects opinions (δοκέοντα)” (fr. 28). Finally, in fragment 17 his critique is even more general: “The crowd (πολλοί) does not understand things such as they encounter them; things only ‘appear to them’ (δοκέουσι).”¹⁰

Parmenides, for his part, criticizes the road that leads to an erroneous set of opinions; and like Xenophanes, after having criticized the anthropomorphization of the gods, and, like Heraclitus, after having criticized the ignorance of the crowd, he proposes his own philosophy, exhibited on a road “of persuasion.”

This didactic and polemical approach of Parmenides, totally absent from the commentaries on his philosophy from Aristotle onward, arises however in a clear way — as we will see — from the fragments of his *Poem*, and provides justification for finding in Parmenides not only the conception of the fact of being (ἐόν) that has marked Western

¹⁰ The presentation of an erroneous theory in order to avoid it goes even beyond the “presocratic” atmosphere and the domain of philosophy. Indeed, we know that among the Euclidean mathematicians the Master presented false theorems to the students so that they would be able to distinguish the theorems that were true from the fallacious ones. Proclus attributes to Euclid a work called *Pseudaria*, of “cathartic” character (In *Primum Euclidis elementorum librum commentariū*, 69).

“ontology” forever, but also its justification, which is a refutation of what the humans “who know nothing” (fr. 6.4) have proposed as “opinions” (δόξαι).

*Outline of the contents of the nineteen
recovered fragments of the Poem*

What do we find in the nineteen authentic citations (about one hundred fifty-five verses) of Parmenides, once they are isolated against the interpretations and commentaries that accompany them? In what follows we will refer only to the topics that are treated; their analysis could be the target of a later study.

Among the citations recovered there is first of all a long text (thirty verses), found in Sextus Empiricus, which has a special character, for, before commenting upon it (we leave aside this commentary, clearly of Stoic origin¹¹), Sextus affirms, “It is in this way that the *Περὶ φύσεως* of Parmenides begins” (*Adv. Math.* VII.111). This text is remarkable because it says that it is in accordance with his desire (or “will,” *θυμός*, fr. 1.1) that the addressee of the teaching will be received and heard by an “Instructress of philosophy.” The Aristotelico-Simplician tradition ignores this detail, which is incidentally an essential one. And that tradition also ignores the fact that the teaching that Instructress of philosophy proposes that one follow has *necessarily* (as we have already noted) a positive side (knowledge of the heart of truth) and a negative side (being informed about the opinions of mortals) (fr. 1.29-30). It is precisely the meaning of the opinions (δόξαι) that will make Parmenides a stranger later on, for the possessive genitive “of mortals” (or “of men”), which *always* accompanies the word “opinion,” will disappear in the Aristotelico-Simplician tradition and one will speak

¹¹ See Christopher John Kurfess, *Restoring Parmenides' Poem: Essays Toward a New Arrangement of the Fragments based on a Reassessment of the Original Sources* (University of Pittsburgh, 2012), p. 29, n. 31

“of the *doxa*... of Parmenides,” as we will see.

Regarding the other eighteen citations (some very long, such as “fragment ¹² 8” — sixty-two verses; most very brief — between four and five lines; and four — fr. 3, 14, 15, and 17 — only one line), *we will never know* in what order they were found in the original text of the *Poem*. All attempts to restore this text must rely on an interpretation of what one finds in each citation, but the risk of falling into a vicious circle is clear, which is the case in the reconstruction of the *Poem* that has been established since 1795¹³ and which is accepted today as *vox dei*. Given that it relies on Aristotelico-Simplician outlines, this reconstruction must be abandoned without hesitation.

Fortunately, as the philosophy lesson that the Goddess proposes to her listener requires two steps, this allows us to propose a certain reading order among some fragments. A programmatic passage, today fragment 5 (“It is common [shared] where I begin, for I will return there again”), which attests to the circular (εὐκυκλέος, fr. 1.29) character of genuine investigation, could find its place, for example, after fragment 1.

Now, at the end of Sextus’ long citation, which justly merits the name of “fragment 1”, the Goddess had said that it is necessary to find out about both (ἡμῆν) the heart of truth and (ἡδέ) the opinions of mortals; and a passage of seven and a half verses seems to describe these two possibilities (ἡ μὲν...ἡ δὲ). It could be placed after the programmatic passage (fr. 5).

This passage, the current fragment 2, ends with this prohibition: “You will not know something that is not, nor mention it” (οὔτε γὰρ ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἔον [οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν] οὔτε φράσαις, fr. 2.6-7). Another citation, the laconic fragment 3, “it is the same thing to be and to think” (τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἔστιν τε καὶ εἶναι), could justify that

¹² In order to allow the reader to locate the citations, we use the customary numbering, which is however very much debatable.

¹³ It was proposed by Georg G. Fülleborn in *Fragmente des Parmenides*, Züllichau.

impossibility. And a further passage, today fragment 6, begins with a formula that confirms the prohibition against referring to that which is not: “It is necessary to say and to think that what is, is” (Χρή τὸ λέγειν τὸ νοεῖν τ’ἔὸν ἔμμεναι, fr. 6.1a). This passage could be placed after fragment 3.

The rest of fragment 6 takes up again the foundation of the persuasive road announced in fragment 2 (ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι, μηδέν δ’οὐκ ἔστιν, fr. 6.1b-2a), and describes in a very detailed way the opposite road, the one manufactured by “the men who know nothing” (fr. 6.4), who mix up in their heads to be and not to be, which is particular to a “wandering” intellect (πλακτὸν νόον, fr. 6.6). Another passage, fragment 16, could explain the reasons for this incorrect use of the intellect, and it is probable that in the original this fragment was found after fragment 6.

The enigmatic final phrase of this fragment 16, “for thought is what is full” (τό γὰρ πλέον ἐστι νόημα, fr. 16.4), could find an echo in a new reference to the νόος at the beginning of fragment 4, which says that one cannot allow that “that which is, be cut off from that which is” (fr. 4.2); this also would explain the plural, also enigmatic, at the beginning of fragment 7: “[there are not] beings that are not” (εἶναι μὴ ἑόντα, fr. 7.1). The rest of this fragment continues the merciless critique of the originators of the “opinions” and commands thought to move away from that route. The final verse of this fragment 7 continues directly (according to the testimony of Simplicius) into fragment 8, which begins by maintaining that there now remains only one word as a road: “ἔστι” (fr 8.1).

The “logical” result that is deduced from the “program of studies” of the authentic text, without taking account of the commentaries or the anachronistic interpretations, and which, for the moment, ties the authentic passages together (clearly, with other passages of uncertain placement which could be located in the interior of the ensemble), concerns fragment 1, fragment 5, fragment 2, fragment 3, fragment 6,

fragment 16, fragment 4, fragment 7, and fragment 8.

What does one find in this ensemble (nine fragments) of authentic citations? One finds, first of all, the necessity of inquiring about two “manners” or “ways”¹⁴ of explaining reality (fr. 1.30), of which one, *a posteriori* (fr. 7.2) should be abandoned because it is only a vicious circle (fr. 6.9). Fragment 5 does not opt for one specific starting point for investigation, for once one of the ways shows that it is not genuine, the other one is automatically obvious. Now, each way of investigation relies on a kind of axiom: There is being (ἔστιν), because not-being is not possible (οὐκ ἔστι μή εἶναι), or there is no being (οὐκ ἔστιν), because not being (not to be) is necessary (χρεών ἔστι μή εἶναι). Fragment 2 sets out these two possibilities and retains the first (because it is a “persuasive” manner of moving forward); the second, on the other hand, is completely unknowable (παναπευθέα, fr. 2.6), for it is impossible to mention and to think what is not.

Fragment 3 (“It is the same thing to be and to think”) explains the impossibility of thinking that which is not of the conclusion of fragment 2, and fragment 6 takes up again the opposite necessity: that of saying and thinking that which is (fr. 6.1). And thereafter, didactically, the fragment gives a very negative description of the “creators” of the erroneous route: the mortals “who know nothing,” as they are incapable of making use of their sensations in a correct manner, and their intellect rambles. Fragment 16 takes up again the notion of intellect (νόος) and explains its origins, and fragment 4 emphasizes that it is able to “grasp” that which is not present. Fragment 7 moves thought (νόημα) away from the erroneous route once and for all, and fragment 8 retains, as the single possibility, the road that relies on ἔστιν.

The source of the long fragment 8 is Simplicius, but a large

¹⁴ The word ὁδός already in Parmenides’ time had the double sense of “road” and of “manner.” See on this theme Pindar, *Ol.* VIII. 13: “With the help of the gods, there are many ways to have success.” The English word ‘way’ inherits the double meaning of ὁδός.

number of commentators and interpreters have cited pieces of it, as it is in the set of verses 1 to 50 where the attributes (σήματα) of the fact of being are found, notably its absolute and necessary character, which prevents one from being able even to envisage denying it. Parmenides says that this speech (λόγος) is around truth, which is one of the subjects of the “program of studies” mentioned at the end of the first fragment. And at verse 50, still in fragment 8, he says that he is now going to set out the opinions of mortals, which was the other subject about which it was necessary to “inquire.” The Goddess, providing a “deceptive order of words” (κόσμον ἐπέων ἀπατηλόν), states in seven verses a theory that explains reality by the action of two opposite principles, light and darkness, and in the two final verses of fragment 8 she says that she has presented these erroneous opinions “in order to prevent any point of view of mortals (βροτῶν) from surpassing you” (8.60–1).

The explanation of reality through the action of opposite forces, proposed by the “opinions,” continues in the current fragment 9, which, according to Simplicius, comes “right after” fragment 8; and another passage, the current fragment 12, which also makes use of the two opposite principles, fire and night, could also be part of the account of the opinions of mortals. Finally, the current fragment 19, which begins in a slightly abrupt manner (“In this way things are born, according to opinion, and in this way they exist now”), seems to be a synopsis of the δοξαὶ βροτῶν.

So far we have reconstructed (which does not mean that the fragments were found one right after the other) an integrated series concerning fragments 1, 5, 2, 3, 6, 16, 4, 7, 8, 9, 12, and 19.

One passage in which the Goddess expresses herself in the first person — she does not report a theory “of mortals” —, and which seems to clarify which is the type of investigation that leads toward the truth (“You will know the *physis* of the *aether*, etc.”), fragment 10, could have followed on in the original from the critique of the “opinions.” In a

series of passages, all very brief, there would be samples of this type of investigation: fragment 11, fragment 13, fragment 14, fragment 15, fragment 17 and fragment 18. *Mutatis mutandis*, one would find in these passages a Parmenidean “physics” different from the one found in the “opinions,” as it does not rely on two contradictory principles, and the place that these citations could occupy as the starting point of a new investigation would be explained by fragment 5, which is “programmatic” in nature.

Here is what we find in the nineteen original citations of the *Poem*, once they are extricated from Aristotelico-Simplician commentaries or interpretations.

There is a set of thirteen fragments that could comply with the “plan of work” announced toward the end of fragment 1, for they expand upon the road to follow in order to reach the truth, showing its foundations, from which flow the necessity of avoiding following the road of opinions. The very critical references in relation to “mortals” explain the reflections on *vóos* (which are found in other passages), particularly its capacity to tie “that which is to that which is” (fr. 4), which prohibits it from following the road that claims that “there are things that do not exist” (fr. 7.1). The result of this prohibition confirms that there is only one road that remains. Once this road is set out, Parmenides opposes it to the erroneous route of “opinions.”

Alongside this probable order of reading, which relies on ideas that appear in passages that would seem to constitute a coherent, “Parmenido-Parmenidean” approach, there are six fragments (fr. 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, and 18) that could answer to the “physical” teaching proposed by the Goddess in fragment 10, as we have noted above. For Parmenides, they do not make up a “deceptive order of words” as would be the case for the “opinions”¹⁵ (let us not forget that the physics of the

¹⁵ Let us look at a few examples: “[The moon] which shines in the night, wandering around the earth...” (fr. 14), “Thus just as in each there is a mixture of limbs marvelous in their movements, so too the intellect is present is present to humans” (fr.16).

opinions relies on two opposite principles, which are nowhere to be found in the six fragments just mentioned). A possible place for this group of citations (still preceded by fragment 10) could be located before fragment 7, and, in that case, the plural in 7.1 (“there will not be οὐκ ἔόντα”) could refer to “physical” truths.¹⁶ Another possibility would involve placing this set of citations after fragment 19, in which Parmenides finishes his treatment of “opinions.” According to the programmatic passage of fragment 5 (“It is common [shared] where I begin, for I will return there again”), the place is not decisive; it suffices to place these verses in a context where there are true assertions (see note 15), either before line 8.50, or after fragment 19.

An unknown Parmenides

Now, the Parmenides whom we have just summarized in accordance with what he says in the authentic citations of his *Poem* is replaced from Aristotle onward by a Parmenides who is a stranger. *Neither in Aristotle nor in the doxography of Aristotelian origin is there the least reference to the two elements that, alongside his discovery of the “fact of being,” emerge in a clear way from the recovered citations: neither to the didactic character of the Poem, which explains the structure of the text (a “philosophy lesson”), nor to his critique of “mortals,” who had proposed dangerous “opinions.”*

All of that began, therefore, with Aristotle (Plato, to whom we will return, was more faithful to Parmenides; he even “Parmenidized” him!), who, seeking explanations about the ἀρχαί in the “first who philosophized”,¹⁷ found in the *Poem* references to some elements (fire, earth) and, for unknown reasons, assigned these ἀρχαί (which

¹⁶ Let us recall that the “route of Truth” ends at line 50 of fragment 8.

¹⁷ We have already cited this passage of the *Metaphysics*: “It is clear that those who philosophized (φιλοσοφέσαντας) about the truth, stated certain principles and certain causes (ἀρχάς τινας καὶ αἰτίας)” (*Met.* A.III.983b2).

Parmenides criticizes) as belonging to Parmenides' own view: "Compelled to follow the phenomena (τοιζ φαινομένοις) and conceiving that, while the One is according to reason (κατὰ τὸν λόγον), and the multiple falls under sensation, he [=Parmenides] establishes (τιθήσι) two causes and *two principles*, as if he was saying fire and earth. Of these causes, he [=Parmenides] puts the hot with being, and the other with not-being" (*Metaphysics* 986b31). Inexplicably, Aristotle enlists Parmenides as the spokesman for his enemies, "the mortals"!

As we have indicated (see note 17), Aristotle considers all of the Presocratics with regard to the investigation of causes and principles. We take the liberty of calling this claim "anachronistic," like the criticism of Parmenides because he does not abide by Aristotelian syllogistic. And since, according to Aristotle, the investigation of causes and principles must concern not only the "intelligible" but also — and especially, in the first philosophers — the "sensible," and since in the *Poem* Parmenides speaks of a pair of opposites, light and darkness, or fire and earth, Aristotle attributes this point of view to Parmenides himself, who thus would become someone who, "obligated" by τὰ φαινόμενα, had to account for them. The disinformation enterprise — we are not aware of the reason — is more than obvious: since Aristotle did not grasp the dissenting side of Parmenides in relation to "mortals," he interpreted the notion of δόξα with the sense of "appearance" — a meaning that the word never had before Sophistic¹⁸ —, that is to say, with the sense of τὰ φαινόμενα, and so made Parmenides a sort of Plato *avant la lettre* — which Plato had not done —: a monist, when he expresses himself κατὰ τὸν λόγον, and a dualist when he proposes ἀρχαί in order to explain τὰ φαινόμενα. The philosopher of disjunction ("one is, or one is not," fr. 8.16; "it is necessary to be absolutely or not to be," fr. 8.11) becomes in Aristotle the spokesman for the Platonic conjunction: sensible and

¹⁸ See Yvon Lafrance, *La théorie platonicienne de la doxa*, Montréal/Paris, Bellarmin/Les Belles Lettres, 1981, *passim*.

intelligible.

In our section “Methodological precautions” we stated that even if our knowledge of lost works, such as the *Poem* of Parmenides, is partial, it would be unimaginable that in the passages of his book that are not cited — thus, lost forever — the philosopher would have maintained theses contrary to those that we find in the cited passages. In the description of the δόξα Parmenides criticizes their originators, the mortals, for having taken up contrary notions (contrary: ἀντία, fr. 8.55; notions: Parmenides does not use the word ‘principle,’ even for showing the people whom he criticizes), apart from which “there is nothing” (fr. 9.4) (and he does not hesitate to say that “they are mistaken,” fr. 8.54). These notions are “flame of fire” (fr. 8.56) and “dark night” (fr. 8.59), which Aristotle assimilates to fire and to earth respectively. It would be unimaginable that in other passages of the *Poem*, Parmenides would have adopted these same two notions as “principles,” particularly if one of the two, earth, would be assimilated to not-being (Met. 986b31), because, for Parmenides, not-being does not exist.

Parmenides is a pre-sophistic author who, like his contemporaries, did not make a distinction between what will later become “being” (“l’être”) and “the beings” (“les étants”); for him, as for the “*physiologoi*,” being is the beings. Parmenides says this on two occasions in his *Poem*: one cannot separate that which is from that which is (fr. 4.2, fr. 8.25). And, in his *Poem*, he sets out the characteristics of being that are found in the beings and which mean that they are. But as in his time there were certainly other possible explanations which did not take into account the absolute and necessary character of the fact of being, Parmenides offered the example of “points of view” (γνώμας, fr. 8.53) that explain reality based on the most obvious of oppositions, that of light and night. For the “mortals” who maintain these “opinions,” there is nothing apart from these components (fr. 9.4). Even in the case of the “mortals,” δόξα does not mean τὰ φαινόμενα: for them *reality* is the result of contradictory notions.

The description of the “opinions” continues in fragment 9 (which, according to its source, Simplicius, comes after fragment 8), where the Goddess confirms that “all” has been “named” light and night; and in fragment 12, which refers once more to “rings” (word uncertain) composed of fire and of night. This is how Parmenides describes “in what way things come to be and exist, according to opinion” (fr. 19): dependent on two opposite notions.¹⁹

Now, in this unfamiliar Parmenides who emerges starting from Aristotle, the Eleatic would be the author, also, of a theory about “appearances,” represented by the δόξαι. This interpretation has monopolized Parmenidean studies up to now. But the first witness to his philosophy, Plato, had already criticized Parmenides *on the grounds that he did not admit the existence of the appearances*, which obliged Plato to plan to refute him in order to be able to demonstrate that the sophist is really an illusionist.

*Parmenides, according to Plato,
said nothing about the “appearances”*

Plato furnishes us in an indirect way with elements that confirm the outline that comes out of the fragments directly, an outline that will, thereafter, be ignored and waffled about by Aristotle, who “Platonizes” Parmenides and makes of him a sort of antecedent of the Divided Line of the *Republic* (which Plato himself had not done). This dualism is non-existent in Parmenides. Plato in the *Sophist* saw that, given the absolute character of the fact or being (even if in his interpretation, instead of “Platonizing” Parmenides, he “Parmenidized” Parmenides), there is not the least allusion in the *Poem* to phenomena or to appearances, as the dichotomy between being and appearing had not yet

¹⁹ The currently accepted arrangement of the *Poem* has also placed within “the *doxa*” fragments 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18, which do not have anything to do with the dualist physics of the “mortals.”

come to be. Now, when Plato says that if the Sophist is really someone who supposes that there is appearance and opinions (φαίνεσθαι τε καὶ δοκεῖν) (*Soph.* 236e), without being (*l'être*), one must first of all refute Parmenides because, for the latter, these notions come under the heading of not-being, and not-being does not exist. Plato's point of view is clear and precise. It is in order to explain that there is a kind of being that is not the contrary but the other of being (*l'être*), that Plato wrote the *Sophist*, and when he arrives at that conclusion, the protagonist of the dialogue admits that they have gone "beyond what Parmenides prohibited" (258c),²⁰ that is to say, they have shown that, despite Parmenides, there are appearances.

The burden of Aristotle's (erroneous) interpretation

Starting with Aristotle, no one has put in doubt the image of a Parmenides who is a monist when he deals κατὰ λόγον with the One and immobile being (this is not the occasion to question what Aristotle says) and a dualist when, compelled by τὰ φαινόμενα, he proposes as ἀρχαί fire and earth, that is to say, being and not-being (!). The burden of the interpretation is so strong that a citer of the stature of Simplicius, always concerned to pass down texts that are lost today but that he possessed,²¹ but affected by the millennium²² that separates him from Parmenides, commits a serious error when he cites the end of fr. 8: "Afterwards, Parmenides, who moves from the intelligible (τῶν νοητῶν) to the sensible (τὰ αἰσθητὰ), or, *as he says himself*, from the ἀλήθεια to

²⁰ "We, for our part, have not demonstrated only that not-being is, we have shown what the idea of not-being is; because, after having demonstrated that the other exists, and that it is shared among all the beings in relation to one another, we have dared to say that it is each of these parts in its opposition to being that is really not-being" (258d-e).

²¹ He says that he possesses Parmenides' book, which has become "rare" (*In Phys.* 144.28).

²² Baltussen has written that in Simplicius one detects "modern projections about quotations from written sources," *Philosophy and exegesis in Simplicius: the methodology of a commentator*, London 2008, p. 22.

the δόξα, maintains: ‘I finish here the persuasive reasoning and thought about truth. Learn, starting from here, *the opinions of mortals*, by listening to the deceptive order of my words.’ And next he continues: ‘It is they [thus, the mortals], who have set up viewpoints to name the forms’” (*In Phys.* 30.14–31.2). The genitive ‘of mortals’ is clear and distinct, and what follows confirms that it is they, the mortals, who have proposed a deceptive order of words. Between a textual citation, which he has the good fortune to retain, and Aristotle’s interpretation, Simplicius prefers Aristotle...²³

In the doxography of Aristotelian ancestry, the ignorance of the polemical character of the exposition of the “opinions,” and its attribution to Parmenides himself,²⁴ could have remained as an oddity that is easy to refute (like the “everything flows” of Heraclitus), but it was reinforced and “systematized” in the first work devoted exclusively to Parmenides, published in 1795 by Georg G. Fülleborn.²⁵ The author, of Kantian background, finds in the intelligible/sensible dichotomy of the Parmenides of Simplicius (from whom he draws his inspiration, p. 54) an antecedent of the notions of experience and of reason in Kant. He thus sets up a division of the Poem into two “parts,” the Truth and the *Doxa*, and, subsequently, places the eighteen fragments known at the time (fragment 19 was not found until 1810) within these “parts.” And, as he believes that the “opinions” concern τὰ φαινόμενα, he places in the *Doxa* part not only the final verses of fragment 8 (which do, undoubtedly, deal with “opinions”), but also fragments 9 to 18,

²³ See our article “La aristotelización y platonización de Parménides por Simplicio”, *Argos* 38 (2015): 32–51. Two works of I.A. Licciardi, without arriving at the extreme results that we are adopting, comes close to our position: *Parmenide tràdito, Parmenide tràdito nel Commentario de Simplicio alla Fisica di Aristotele*, Academia, 2016; and *Critica dell'apparente et critica apparente. Simplicio interprete di Parmenide nel Commentario al De Caelo di Aristotele*, Academia, 2017.

²⁴ The notion of “opinion” is always accompanied by a reference to its authors, “mortals” (fr. 1.30, fr. 8.50) or “men” (fr. 19.2).

²⁵ See note 13.

borrowed, most of them, from authors other than Simplicius (Aristotle, Plutarch, Caelius Aurelianus, Galen, Clement, etc.). This division became canonical and established in *aeternum* by H. Diels. A secondary consequence of this arrangement is the following: all of the fragments placed after verse 8.50, which brings to a close the πιστόν λόγον ἡδὲ νόημα ἀμφὶς ἀληθείης and announces the presentation ἀπὸ τοῦδε of the δόξας βροτείας, remains outside of the truth (as, for example, the statement that the Moon “is always oriented toward the rays of the Sun” [fr. 15] and does not have a light of its own [fr. 14], or the explanation of the possible cause of the “wandering” of νόος [fr. 16]).

*Probable reading order of the fragments
according to the (literal) content of each citation*

Having cleared away the interpretations and commentaries that always accompany the literal citations, we can propose the following reading order, according to the literal content of each fragment:

- (A) Introduction, presentation of “roads for thinking,” and programmatic text: fr. 1, fr. 5, fr. 2.1-5.
- (B) Demonstration of the impossibility of following the second road: fr. 2.6-9.
- (C) Identity of being and thinking: fr. 3.
- (D) New confirmation of the necessity of following the first road: fr. 6.1-2.
- (E) Critique of “mortals,” creators of the second road: fr. 6.3-9.
- (F) Explanation of the possibility on the part of νόος to become “wandering”: fr. 16.
- (G) The special power of νόος: fr. 4.
- (H) Necessity for νόημα to move away from the second road: fr. 7.

- (I) The σήματα of ἕόν: fr. 8.1-50.
- (J) Exposition and critique of the “opinions” of mortals: fr. 8.51-61. fr. 9, fr. 12, fr. 19.
- (K) New starting point proposed by the Goddess: necessity of a “physics” that does not rely on opposite principles, the way that of the “mortals” does: fr. 10, fr. 11, fr. 13, fr. 14, fr. 15, fr. 17, fr.18.

If it is possible to follow a reading order of the Poem that emerges in a very likely way from the fragments themselves, not contaminated by commentators and citers, a Parmenides by himself could replace the stranger presented by the Aristotelico-Simplician tradition. Now, with the outline of his *Poem* purified, it is a question of trying to understand his philosophy. But that is another story...

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