

Epistemological Relevance of Parmenides' Ontology

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ABSTRACT: It is possible to understand Parmenides' *being* as the 'totality of what exists'. Parmenides' insight is that *being* is a compact continuum (fr. 4), and he gives a logical demonstration of this insight recognizing that *non-being*, which only could divide *being* in a plurality of beings, does not exist. Therefore, knowledge of *being* could only be the holistic appraisal of the totality of *being* – a form of knowledge unconceivable for men. Human knowledge is always articulated in concepts, images, relations..., expressed by their names. Men do not catch *being* itself, but, at best, some limited features of a minimal part of it, as they appear from human and personal perspectives. Thus, Parmenides' calls mortals 'two-headed' who claim that their truths represent the reality of *being*, since their pretense would imply the existence both of *being* and of *non-being*. This epistemological conception is the only relevant result of Parmenides' ontology. Parmenides' epistemology solves many of the philosophical riddles of his time, it shows that the so-called Zeno's paradoxes are sound arguments, and foreshadows the doctrines of Protagoras and Gorgias.

KEY-WORDS: Being; Epistemology; God; Knowledge (of being, human, true); Mortals; Name; Non-being, Ontology; Opinion; Rhetoric; Route (of inquiry); Sphere; Truth; Void.

RIASSUNTO: È possibile intendere l'*essere* di Parmenide come la 'totalità dell'esistente'. L'intuizione di Parmenide è che l'*essere* è un continuum compatto (fr. 4), e egli fornisce una dimostrazione logica di questa intuizione riconoscendo che il *non-essere*, che solo potrebbe dividere l'esistente in una molteplicità di *esseri*, non esiste. Di conseguenza, la conoscenza dell'*essere* può soltanto essere l'apprendimento della totalità dell'*essere* nel suo insieme – una forma di conoscenza che è inconcepibile per l'uomo.

La conoscenza umana si articola sempre in concetti, immagini, relazioni..., espresse da nomi, parole. Gli uomini dunque non colgono l'*essere* stesso ma, al più, alcuni limitati aspetti di una minima parte di esso, come appaiono da prospettive umane e personali. Parmenide attribuisce l'epiteto 'dalla doppia testa' a quei mortali che pretendono che le loro verità rappresentino la realtà dell'*essere*, perché questa pretesa implicherebbe l'esistenza insieme dell'*essere* e del *non-essere*. Questa concezione epistemologica è l'unico risultato che conti dell'ontologia di Parmenide. L'epistemologia di Parmenide scioglie molti degli enigmi filosofici del suo tempo, mostra che i cosiddetti paradossi di Zenone sono argomenti validi e prefigura le dottrine di Protagora e Gorgia.

PAROLE-CHIAVE: Scuola Eleatica; Ontologia; Metafisica; Storia della Filosofia; Filosofia Antica.

The Problem

As we have reasons to believe, Parmenides' *Poem* is mainly a scientific treatise, displaying its author's conceptions of the world (Plu. *Adv. Col.* 1114.BC); but it also shows the conclusions of Parmenides' inquiry on the nature of human knowledge.

In the late archaic period, the growing importance of councils and assemblies, the introduction of written laws, which made justice more accessible to citizens, of public trials, and of the beginning of the scientific research extended the scope of public debate, but also showed the disparity of opinions and the often-misleading outcomes of oratory. Is it possible to prove the truth beyond doubt? I imagine that, at a certain point of his life, Parmenides asked himself this question. He looked, then, for a certainly true statement, from which to reach truth through a series of rigorously logical deductions. When he set about to compose his scientific poem, he had already come to his conclusions on this subject, and began his work by writing them down. As we shall see, these conclusions are negative, but they are nonetheless relevant.¹

At the end of the Proem, a goddess tells his pupil (Parmenides) that she will teach him everything. The plural πάντα involves two different kind of teachings: one is “Ἀληθείης εὐκυκλέος ἄτρεμῆς ἦτορ” (“the unshakable heart of the well circular Truth”), and the other touches “βροτῶν δόξας, ταῖς οὐκ ἔνι πίστις ἀληθίης” (“the opinions of the mortals, in which there is no true reliance”). Thus, the word ‘everything’ includes both a single true teaching, and a plurality of mortals’ opinions. Parmenides develops these teachings in two separate

¹ See Calenda, 2011, p. 144–191.

² εὐκυκλέος Simp. in *Cael.* 557.26; εὐπειθέος Sext. *M.* 7.111.35; εὐφεγγέος Procl. in *Ti.* 345.15. Cerri, 1999, p. 184: “Delle tre lezioni quella di Simplicio si configura senz’altro come *lectio difficilior*” (“Of the three variants, Simplicius’ one is undoubtedly *lectio difficilior*”).

parts of the Poem, traditionally named 'Truth' (Ἀλήθεια) and 'Opinion' (Δόξα).

Being: the basic insight

The goddess begins her teaching with a logical demonstration, but I think that in Parmenides' mind the demonstration is nothing else than the logical reformulation of a basic insight, a certain truth, which he perhaps first perceived as a divine revelation: existence certainly exists, and what exists is an uninterrupted continuum. In what surrounds us, we never perceive – we cannot even conceive – gaps in existence: always and everywhere, nothing is there beside what exists, which Parmenides names *being* (τὸ εἶν).

Since it is continuous, without interruptions, *being* is not fragmented in a plurality of *beings*. This, I maintain, is the meaning of fragment 4:

λεῦσσε³ δ' ὅμως ἀπεόντα νόωι παρεόντα βεβαίως·
οὐ γὰρ ἀποτμήξει τὸ ἐὸν τοῦ εἶντος ἔχεσθαι
οὔτε σκιδνάμενον πάντη πάντως κατὰ κόσμον
οὔτε συνιστάμενον.

Look upon things though distant in your mind as strictly close:
for you shall not cut off being from holding close to being,
neither completely dispersed everywhere through the cosmos,
nor gathered together.

Even things which we see loosely apart, dispersed in the whole universe, must be thought as strictly connected (παρεόντα βεβαίως) in a compact whole. The plurals 'ἀπεόντα' and 'παρεόντα' obviously refer

³ Viola, 1987, v. 2, p. 80: "Il verbo λείσσειν deve dunque includere nella sua etimologia l'idea di chiarezza, di luminosità, di trasparenza espressa dall'aggettivo λευκός" ("The verb λείσσειν must therefore include in its etymology the idea of clarity, brightness, transparency expressed by the adjective λευκός").

to the things we conceive in our mind.

Fragment 4 is an isolated text, and, likely, Parmenides further discussed the argument in verses now lost. A passage of fragment 8 (verses 8.22–25) develops the same concept: *being* does not consist of a multitude of separate *beings*. However, this passage adds something else: the property of existing is not only continuous, but it is also uniformly distributed all over *being* (οὐδέ τι τῆι μᾶλλον [...] οὐδέ τι χειρότερον). It is not possible to exist more or less, but the whole exists fully (πᾶν δ' ἔμπλεόν ἐστιν ἑόντος). This is how Parmenides conceives existence: a property uniformly distributed on what exists. It does not mean that what exists is uniform from all points of view, but the whole is uniform as far as existence is concerned. It is there: dense or rare, material or not, it is there. Thus, even if part of *being* was a material void, this void would not be devoid of existence, but it would enjoy exactly the same existence as matter does.⁴ As we shall see in fragment 2, Parmenides conceives existence as a binary property: either it exists or it exists not, and not existing is nothing. Further on, Parmenides explains (8.46–49) that nothing breaks the continuity of *being*, since no *non-being* exists, which could prevent a part of *being* to be strictly connected to another part (τό κεν παύοι μιν ἰκνεῖσθαι εἰς ὁμόν); nor is *being* here greater and there smaller, for existence is the same always and everywhere. The bonds in which *being* lies (ἐν πείρασι κύρει) represent the force of the logical necessity, because Parmenides, as we shall see, formulates his basic insight as a logical deduction from the premise that *being* exists and *non-being* does not exist.

The uniformity of *being* is stated also by the simile in verses 8.43–45:

⁴ Note that Parmenides never mentions the void (κενόν); it is Melissus who identifies the 'void' with *non-being*: “τὸ γὰρ κενὸν οὐδὲν ἐστίν” (“the void is nothing”) (30 B 7.7). Because of this, the Atomists scorn him (Arist. *Metaph.* 985B.4). Curd, 1998, p. 182: “for Leucippus and Democritus calling void ‘not-being’ is clearly provocative”.

αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πείρας πύματων, τετελεσμένον ἐστί,⁵
 πάντοθεν εὐκύκλου σφαίρης ἐναλίγκιον ὄγκῳ,
 μεσσοῦθεν ἰσοπαλῆς πάντη· τὸ γὰρ οὔτε τι μείζον
 οὔτε τι βαιότερον πελέναι χρεόν ἐστι τῆι ἢ τῆι.

But for the extreme bond, it is complete,
 everywhere similar to the surface⁶ of a well rounded sphere,
 from the middle equal everywhere: for it is necessary that
 neither somewhat greater
 nor somewhat smaller it is here or there.

Existence is uniform all over *being*, equal everywhere, exactly as
 all the points of a spherical surface are equally distant from the center.

Being: the logical demonstration

Parmenides aims to give a rigorous proof of his insight: therefore, the goddess first teaching does not start with fragment 4, but with the logically structured fragment 2. The investigation may follow two routes of logical inquiry (ὁδοὶ διζήσιος). The first one is the route leading to truth: *being* exists and *non-being* does not exist. It is an obvious tautology: thus, we must admit it as true. As we shall see, it leads to interesting conclusions. The second route leads nowhere: *being* does not exist⁷, and *non-being* must exist. It is a plain contradiction, since *being* is the totality of what exists and nothing else exists. We cannot speak of *non-being*, nor can we conceive it. The same argument is resumed in 8.15–18.

One can reasonably doubt that a tautology could provide

⁵ Diels, 1897, p. 38 puts a coma after τετελεσμένον ἐστί, others after πάντοθεν. Mourelatos, 1970, p. 123: “Diels’ punctuation is preferable”.

⁶ I translate ‘ὄγκος’ with ‘surface’ rather than ‘bulk’ or ‘mass’, since only the points of the spherical surface are equal everywhere from the middle, not the points of the volume. After all, what one sees of the sphere, its bulk, is its surface.

⁷ This, in my opinion, is the meaning of the compact form ‘ἔστιν’ in the first hemistich of verse 2.3.

informative value: thus, are we stranded into a logical void? I do not think so: in this case, the tautology is a way to put in logical form Parmenides' basic awareness that existence is a compact continuum. It is also possible to conceive this awareness as an empirical fact. We shall see that this fact involves striking consequences about human knowledge.

The goddess then goes on, further detailing the consequences of following each route. She stresses first (fragment 5) that, since Ἀλήθεια is well circular (εὐκυκλέος) – that is, tautological – it does not matter where the inquiry will start from. Nonetheless, it must start from somewhere, and the goddess' states her choice in fragment 6.3: she will start from the route of truth,⁸ asserting that *being* exists, and *non-being* does not exist. After that, she will examine the second route, which leads nowhere. Unluckily, this is the route followed by a multitude of mortals, called double-headed (δίκρανοι) since they contradict themselves. Parmenides is full of contempt for those hopeless mortals who are (6.6-8) “κωφοὶ ὁμῶς τυφλοὶ τε, τεθηπότες, ἄκριτα φῦλα, οἷς τὸ πέλειν τε καὶ οὐκ εἶναι ταῦτόν νενόμισται κοῦ ταῦτόν” (“deaf and blind alike, dazed, uncritical breed by whom *being* and *non-being* have been thought both the same and not the same”) (transl.: Gallop, 1984, p. 60)

Parmenides' contempt does not involve the whole of mankind,⁹ but only those foolish people – the majority perhaps – who unwittingly posit the existence of *non-being*, which separates one *being* from another. Thus, they assign to *non-being* the same property – the existence – which pertains to *being*. This is what people do when they believe that the objects, the entities, the qualities they name are well-defined separate *beings*. We shall see in fragment 7 how this basic error arises in

⁸ ἄρξει, Cordero, 1979, p. 21–24; Nehamas, 1981, p. 97–111: “πρώτης γὰρ σ(οι) ἄφ' ὁδοῦ ταύτης διζήσιος ἄρξω”.

⁹ Galgano, 2017, p. 76: “tutti o quasi tutti gli studiosi notano l'opposizione fatta da Parmenide fra i *brotoi* che nulla sanno e l'*eidota phōta* di B 1.3” (“all or almost all the scholars comment on Parmenides' opposition between the *brotoi* who know nothing and the *eidota phōta* of B1.3”).

the human mind, and then, in 8.38-41, what human knowledge is instead.

Knowledge of being

In fragment 6 the goddess announced that she will start by exposing the first route of inquiry. However, since fragment 7 concerns the second route – the one leading nowhere – between fragment 6 and fragment 7 there must have been several verses concerning the first route. In this substantial lacuna, we can place fragment 4, already examined, and fragment 3.

Fragment 3, which is one of the most elusive statements of the poem,¹⁰ says: “τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι” (“indeed, the same thing is to know and to be”). We can safely interpret εἶναι as *being* – the compact totality of what exists – but how must we understand νοεῖν? In the standing fragments of Parmenides' poem, νοεῖν (3; 6.1; 8.8; 8.34, 8.36) and its derivatives (νοῆσαι 2.2, νοητόν 8.8, ἀνόητον 8.17), always refer to the knowledge of *being*. In verse 2.2 ‘νοῆσαι’ points to the scope of the investigation, that is, *being*; in 6.1 νοεῖν is the knowledge that *being* exists; and the same concept implies the use of ‘νοεῖν’ in fragment 8. We can infer, then, that also in fragment 3 νοεῖν is the knowledge of *being*, and that the fragment states what ‘knowledge of *being*’ is. This is why I place fragment 3 after fragment 4, which introduces the main property of *being*, namely, its continuity. Given that *being* is a continuous whole, knowledge of *being* cannot be the description of the multiplicity of elements composing it – such elements do not exist since there is no ‘true’ partition of *being* – but must necessarily be the holistic apprehension of *being* in its totality. Knowledge of *being*, Parmenides' νοεῖν, is then the holistic knowledge

¹⁰ Untersteiner, 1958, p. 130: “è forse il più discusso di quelli di Parmenide” (“it is perhaps the most discussed of those of Parmenides”); Woodbury, 1972, p. 156: “the plainest and most inscrutable of Parmenides' statements”.

of the whole, a knowledge that only an omniscient god could possess; and since such knowledge is part of the whole, it knows itself and identifies itself with *being*. The complete, objective and exhaustive description of *being* is nothing else than *being* itself. Thus, 'knowledge', understood in this holistic sense, merges with *being*, and the word becomes superfluous.

The same concept we find in verses 8.34-36: “ταὐτὸν δ' ἐστὶ νοεῖν τε καὶ οὐνεκεν ἔστι νόημα. / οὐ γὰρ ἄνευ τοῦ ἔοντος,¹¹ ἐν ᾧ πεφρατισμένον ἐστίν, / εὐρήσεις τὸ νοεῖν” (“The same is to know and on account of which is knowledge. For without *being*, in which it is expressed, you will not find knowledge”).

Here the verb νοεῖν has the same meaning as in fragment 3: knowing *being* is to apprehend it in its totality, and νόημα is such knowledge, whose object is the whole *being*: knowledge of *being* is expressed by *being*.

Parmenides' doctrines easily fit into the most advanced scientific and philosophical developments up to his time. His interpretation of the cosmos improves the revolutionary conceptions of the Milesians,¹² and his reflections on the nature of knowledge have significant antecedents in Xenophanes, and especially in Heraclitus.¹³

Xenophanes conceived a god endowed with perfect knowledge (21B24): “οὔλος ὄραϊ, οὔλος δὲ νοεῖ, οὔλος δέ τ' ἀκούει” (“whole he sees, whole he knows, and whole he hears”). On the other hand, human knowledge is limited (21B18): “οὔτοι ἀπ' ἀρχῆς πάντα θεοὶ θνητοῖσ' ὑπέδειξαν, / ἀλλὰ χρόνῳ ζητοῦτες ἐφευρίσκουσιν ἄμεινον” (“Indeed, not from the beginning did gods show everything to the mortals, but with time men discover better”).

The god of Heraclitus personifies true knowledge, to which man

¹¹ Diels and Kranz, 1951, v. 1, p. 238: ἐν from Simplicius; Cordero, 2004, p. 84: ἐφ' from Proclus.

¹² See Calenda, 2017 and 2015. On the importance of Parmenides' scientific doctrines, see Rossetti, 2017.

¹³ See Calenda, 2011, p. 68-78.

could not even imagine approaching (22B78): “ἦθος γὰρ ἀνθρώπειον μὲν οὐκ ἔχει γνῶμας, θεῖον δὲ ἔχει” (“Human nature has no knowledge, the divine has”) and (22B83): “ἀνθρώπων ὁ σοφώτατος πρὸς θεὸν πίθηκος φανεῖται καὶ σοφία καὶ κάλλει καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις πᾶσιν” (“The wisest man is like a monkey in comparison with god for wisdom, beauty and everything else”). The simile of the monkey reveals how thoroughly alien to human knowledge is god’s wisdom. In Heraclitus, this radical difference between the outlook of God and that of men appears clearly also in an ethical sense (22B102): “τῶι μὲν θεῶι καλὰ πάντα καὶ ἀγαθὰ καὶ δίκαια, ἄνθρωποι δὲ ἃ μὲν ἄδικα ὑπειλήφασιν ἃ δὲ δίκαια” (“For god everything is beautiful and good and just, but for men some things are unjust and some others just”). God sees everything as it is, and what-is is as it must be – therefore, good and beautiful; but men distinguish good from bad, following their own points of view and their own interests.

Both Xenophanes and Heraclitus are still dualist, in the sense that they posit a god who knows, and the object of his knowledge. Parmenides does away with the all-knowing god, and merges perfect knowledge with its object, *being*. However, Xenophanes, Heraclitus and Parmenides share the same interest in human knowledge: they posit either an omniscient god (Xenophanes and Heraclitus), or a holistic *being* (Parmenides) in order to show what human knowledge cannot claim to be.

Two-headed mortals

Fragment 3 is likely the conclusive statement of the description of the first route of inquiry. According to the order stated in fragment 6, the examination of the second route follows immediately that of the first. The second route leads nowhere; therefore, I do not think that the subject was much more developed than it is in fragment 7. However, since this fragment starts with ‘in fact’, something is missing between

fragments 3 and 7, and at least part of this lacuna should have concerned the second route of inquiry.

Fragment 7 begins by the following statement: “οὐ γὰρ μήποτε τοῦτο δαμῆι εἶναι μὴ ἐόντα” (“in fact, never it could be imposed that *non-being* exists”). Indeed, to force *non-being* to exist would be a plain contradiction. As the following verse (7.2) clearly states, the goddess restrains her pupil from following the second route of inquiry, the one that denies existence and leads nowhere. Parmenides explains, then, what are the psychological factors that usually deceive men, driving them on this second impassable route. Men are prevented to perceive the unity of *being* by the habit¹⁴ (ἔθος) to countless experiences (πολύπειρον): the superficial use of sight (νωμᾶν ἄσκοπον ὄμμα), which distinguish one object from another; the ringing hearing (ἠχήεσσαν ἀκουήν), choked by words uttered by the language; and the language itself (γλῶσσα), which names objects as if they were separate *beings*.¹⁵ Two-headed mortals are so used to name things, and to recognize them when they see or hear them, that they perceive all those things as distinct *beings*, separated from the rest of *being*. They do not understand that all those things are images formed in their own minds by carving them out of the totality of *being*, following human needs and personal points of view. Because of this, the goddess harshly condemn them in verses 6.4–9.

Signs on the route of being

Having explained what leads two-headed mortals astray, the

¹⁴ Tarán, 1965, p. 73: “inured habit”.

¹⁵ Mansfeld, 1999, p. 331: “Chez Parménide, la mention de l’œil, de l’oreille et de la langue, vise à évoquer, de manière indifférenciée, le comportement cognitif, et l’expérience, des hommes en général” (“In Parmenides, the mention of the eye, the ear and the tongue aims to evoke, in an undifferentiated way, the cognitive behaviour, and the experience, of men in general”). In my opinion, Parmenides does not imply that all the mortals are lead astray by their senses. Only the double-headed ones are deceived, those who do not understand that the objects they perceive are not true *beings*, but only products of their mind.

goddess has nothing else to add about the second route of inquiry, and in fragment 8 she takes up again the first route, which affirms existence. Here the goddess does not teach anything new, she just shows different aspects of what she has already said about the first route of inquiry: along this route, there are many signs (σήματα) – all milestones that mark the same path – equivalent formulations of the path of Persuasion (Πειθοῦς κέλευθος). Since *being* is the totality of what exists, it is ‘unbegotten’ (ἀγένητον) and ‘imperishable’ (ἀνώλεθρον), for if something existed before or after, it would be part of *being* (8.3). *Being* is obviously ‘whole’ (οὔλον) and ‘unique’ (μονογενές);¹⁶ and it is also ‘unmoved’ (ἄτρεμές), and ‘complete’ (τελεστόν)¹⁷ (8.4). Complete is easily understandable: given that *being* is the totality of what exists, nothing is lacking, but why ‘unmoved’? Immobility is perhaps the most disconcerting attribute of Parmenides’ *being*: to understand it, we must remember fragments 4 and 3, and the equivalent passages of fragment 8. For us the world changes in time and in space: we see an infinite variety of objects which form, change, disappear: how can a logical demonstration claim to erase this multiform and ever changing reality? The fact is that Parmenides is not speaking of how we see the world, but of *being* itself. His outlook here is ontological, and since *being* is an unbroken whole, its true knowledge is necessarily holistic – apprehended all together at once – thus, a kind of knowledge we cannot even imagine. Knowledge of *being*, which identifies with *being* itself, includes the totality of what exists, and thus, includes also what we

¹⁶ οὔλον μονογενές (Simp. *In Ph.* 145.4, 78.13, 30.2, 120.23, *In Cael.* 557.18); ἔστι γὰρ οὔλομελές (Plu. *Adv. Col.* 1114C.10); οὔλον μονομελές, (Procl. *In Parm.* 1152.19 Cousin). I keep μονογενές as ‘unique’, which does not necessarily contradicts ἀγένητον.

¹⁷ ἦδ’ ἀτέλεστον (Simp. *In Ph.* 145.4, 78.13, 30.2); ἦδ’ ἀγένητον (Simp. *In Ph.* 120.23, *In Cael.* 557.18). Covotti, 1908, p. 424–427, and Goebel, 1910, p. 100 suggest ἦδη τελεστόν, followed by Tarán, 1965, p. 81, who adds (p. 94): “There is no doubt that Parmenides did refer to the characteristic ‘completeness’ as is demonstrated by fr. VIII.32”. Owen, 1958, p. 77, writes that τελεστόν “it is paleographically simpler but the adjective is not securely attested in Greek”, and suggests ἦδη τελειόν, followed by Mourelatos, 1970, p. 281.

conceive as space and time: there is not a 'meta-time', in which such a totality could change. Verses 8.5–6 clearly stress this concept: “οὐδέ ποτ' ἦν οὐδ' ἔσται, ἐπεὶ νῦν ἔστιν ὁμοῦ πᾶν, / ἔν, συνεχές” (“nor was it once, nor will it be, since it is entirely now at one time, one, continuous”).

The term 'νῦν' is here, in a sense, supra temporal rather than a-temporal. Parmenides sees *being* – the world, the cosmos, the universe... – as a continuous reality, devoid of holes and fractures; and devoid of pauses and of temporal gapes as well: *being* is continuous in every sense, and 'νῦν' indicates the contemporary presence of *being* in its totality.

At this point, the goddess has told all that is relevant for the κούρος to know about *being*, as she had pledged in 1.29. However, it looks as if Parmenides felt himself uncomfortable about his own capacity to make others understand the concept of an unbegotten, unperishable and unmoved *being*, and he repeatedly goes back to this subject in verses 8.6–21.¹⁸

Thus, from the logical point of view verses 8.9–11 appear, in my opinion, somewhat redundant: it is an argument that Parmenides adds *ad abundantiam* to the previous statement that *being* is the supra temporal whole, which is already valid in itself. The argument has a concessive value: even admitting that there was a time after *being* and a time before *being* (ὑστερον ἢ πρόσθεν), what could have impelled *being* to be born at a given time, coming from nowhere, without antecedents that could cause its birth? Some scholars consider the argument as an outcome of the 'principle of sufficient reason'¹⁹ in the sense, perhaps, that there was no sufficient reason for *being* to be born at a given moment. Anyway, to

¹⁸ Mourelatos & M. Pulpito, 2018, p. 123: “the discussion of ungenerability extends to many more verses than are dedicated to any other attribute”.

¹⁹ Reale & Ruggiu, 1991, p. 291: “Né può sussistere alcuna ragione sufficiente affinché una cosa nasca in alcun tempo, prima o dopo, dal momento che il suo inizio è dal nulla.” (“Nor can there be any sufficient reason for a thing to be born at any time, before or after, since its beginning is from nothing”). See also Mourelatos & Pulpito, 2018, p. 122.

deny birth even admitting time – a counterfactual hypothesis for Parmenides – does not prevent that the birth of *being* is much more strictly denied by the fact that *being* is already, in itself, the whole, which includes the totality of what exists, so that neither a time ‘before’ it nor one ‘after’ it are conceivable.²⁰ Melissus trivializes²¹ the concept stating that *being* is infinite and eternal, but Parmenides does not mention neither infinity nor eternity, because space and time are not separate *beings* in which *being* is located. Thus, all we can say about ontology reduces to one single *being*, which (8.29–30) “ταυτόν τ' ἐν ταύτῳι τε μένον καθ' ἑαυτὸ τε κεῖται / χούτως ἔμπεδον αὔθι μένει” (“remaining the same in the same, on itself lies / and there steadfast remains”).

The bonds of strong Necessity (κρατερὴ Ἀνάγκη), which force *being* to be as it is, represent the indisputable continuity of existence, or, which is the same, the logical non-existence of *being*.

Ontology: an image

Conceiving *being* as the totality of what exists makes Parmenides the first philosopher to thematize ontology explicitly. His *being* is the whole of existence; but the main point of his discovery is that men cannot have access to it. Ontology, the knowledge of *being*, is altogether alien to the human mind, and therefore useless. Borges, in his short text ‘*On Rigour in Science*’, gives a visual image of this concept:

...En aquel Imperio, el Arte de la Cartografía logró tal Perfección que el mapa de una sola Provincia ocupaba toda una Ciudad, y el mapa del Imperio, toda una Provincia. Con el tiempo, esos Mapas Desmesurados no satisficieron y los Colegios de Cartógrafos levantaron un Mapa del Imperio, que tenía el tamaño del Imperio y coincidía puntualmente con él.

²⁰ See Calenda, 2011, 169.

²¹ See Calenda, 2011, p. 269–291.

Menos Adictas al Estudio de la Cartografía, las Generaciones Sigüientes entendieron que ese dilatado Mapa era Inútil y no sin Impiedad lo entregaron a las Inclemencias del Sol y de los Inviernos. En los desiertos del Oeste perduran despedazadas Ruinas del Mapa, habitadas por Animales y por Mendigos; en todo el País no hay otra reliquia de las Disciplinas Geográficas.

...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied an entire City, and the map of the Empire, an entire Province. In time, these Immense Maps did not satisfy and the Boards of Cartographers raised a Map of the Empire, that was of the Size of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. Less Addicted to the Study of Cartography, the Following Generations understood that this dilated Map was Useless and not without Impiety they delivered it to the Inclemencies of the Sun and the Winters. In the Deserts of the West persist crumbled Ruins of the Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in the whole Country there is no other relic of the Geographical Disciplines.

The poet creates images, and this immense map of the Empire, coinciding point for point with the Empire itself, is a powerful metaphor of the knowledge of the whole, represented by the map, which identifies itself with its object, just as *voẽv* identifies with *ẽvva*. This image has – *pace* Borges – nothing to do with science, which always deals with drastically simplified problems, but may well represent the absurd claims of ontology. As pointed by Borges, ontology, being useless, remains forsaken, even though this may involve some measure of impiety. Only two-headed mortals still cling helplessly to it, but they only dwell in forgotten ruins.

Parmenides' ontological analysis did not describe *being*, whose infinite richness remains unfathomable and lost forever. The goddess analyzed only one aspect of *being*: its bare existence, and her *πίστις ἀληθής* (true persuasion) is colorless and barren. To communicate with his human pupil, she was forced to use the language of men, and all the so-called 'attributes of *being*' are nothing else than human attempt to

express the undifferentiated continuity of existence. The goddess succeeded in rigorously proving only one thing, namely, that *being* is unfathomable and ineffable; it follows that men must drop any pretense that their 'truths' represent the reality of *being*.

Human knowledge

In verses 8.38–41 Parmenides says what human knowledge is:

τῶι πάντ' ὄνομ(α) ἔσται,
 ὅσσα βροτοὶ κατέθεντο πεποιθότες εἶναι ἀληθῆ,
 γίγνεσθαι τε καὶ ὄλλυσθαι, εἶναί τε καὶ οὐχί,
 καὶ τόπον ἀλλάσσειν διὰ τε χροῶ φανὸν ἀμείβειν.

therefore, all will be name,
 which mortals posited believing them to be truth,
 coming to be and passing away, being and not,
 and shifting place, and changing bright colour.

Human knowledge is always articulated in concepts, images, relations..., expressed by their names (ὀνόματα), which denote objects, entities, values... Besides, we may add, human knowledge drastically simplifies reality: it necessarily points to selected aspect of the world, it is affected by anthropic conditions, and is aimed at human needs. This passage is, in my opinion, the most extraordinary epistemological statement that reached us from the VI and V century. It shows that, as far as our knowledge goes, the consequence of Parmenides' holistic ontology is an absolute nominalism *ante litteram*: since only a continuous undivided *being* exists, not only universals, but also particulars are names given by men to conceptions of their mind.

We see now that the double-headed mortals of verse 6.5, are the men who do not perceive that the mountain, the river, the town, the hot, the good, and so on... are just human concepts referring to parts and aspects of *being* selected by them, following both traditional criteria

and personal points of view. Thus, they are unaware that their knowledge does not catch *being* itself, but, at best, some limited features of a minimal part of it, observed from human and personal perspectives. Since they do not understand that, they trust that the world is exactly as they conceive it, or, at least, that truth is within their grasp. This is not a trifling error; rather it is an issue at the core of the philosophical debate from the fifth century up to Plato and beyond.

At the beginning of his second teaching – the teaching of the mortal's opinions (βροτῶν δόξας) – Parmenides shows how human knowledge implies the distinction of specific elements and properties (8.53–54): “μορφὰς γὰρ κατέθεντο δύο γνώμας ὀνομάζειν· / τῶν μίαν οὐ χρεῶν ἔστιν – ἐν ᾧ πεπλανημένοι εἰσίν” (“They posited forms to name two notions, / one of which is not necessary – and in this they deviated”).

The subject of the verb ‘κατέθεντο’ is an indeterminate plural, who metaphorically points to Parmenides himself.²² Parmenides conceives the world as made by the interaction of two distinct entities, which he names ‘fire’ (πῦρ) and ‘night’ (νύξ), with quite different properties: one, fire, is light and gentle, the other, night, dense and heavy, just as what we call ‘heat’ and ‘matter’ appear to us. Parmenides does not say here that the world ‘is’ made of fire and night – fire and night have no ontological status – but he is only saying that he chooses to name two aspects he recognizes everywhere in what appears to him. This first distinction, although justified by the different properties Parmenides perceives in nature, is undoubtedly a subjective act: by performing it, Parmenides deviates from the route of true knowledge, and formulates his own opinions (γνώμας), opinions that we could properly call ‘scientific’.

Nowhere does Parmenides claim that to give up certain truth is somehow avoidable: the true discourse ended in verse 8.49, and did not

²² In the poetic setting, the goddess cannot indicate a specific author, since she teaches Parmenides own doctrine.

say much about the world.²³ This is the reason why, after verse 8.52, the words of the goddess are deceptive (ἀπατηλόν): she does not teach anymore the “the unshakable heart of the well circular Truth” (1.29), but she starts to describe “the opinions of the mortals, in which there is no true reliance” (1.30): these opinions are always questionable, but nevertheless useful for men. The opinions the goddess teaches are the scientific doctrines of Parmenides. Showing a confidence not altogether unjustified, Parmenides declares (8.60–61) that his description of the world is better than any other human notion will ever be.

Ontological paradoxes

Parmenides' epistemological doctrine solves some apparent paradoxes of the philosophic debate of his time. Among them, the paradox of Heraclitus' river, which is the same and not the same (22B91): “ποταμῶι γὰρ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐμβῆναι δις τῶι αὐτῶι” (“it is not possible to enter twice in the same river”). Reinhardt, 1916, p. 207 states: “der Grundgedanke Heraklitis ist vielmehr das denkbar genauste Gegenteil zur Flusslehre: Beharren im Wechsel, Konstanz in der Veränderung” (“the basic idea of Heraclitus is rather the most conceivable opposite to the theory of flow: perseverance in change, constancy in transformation”). We can agree with him; but what is it that preserves the identity of the river, while it continuously changes? Pradeau, 2002, p. 53 finds the answer in the way the river changes: “une réalité perdure tant que les mouvements qui la distinguent conservent entre eux une certaine mesure (*metron*), et non pas en restant immuable” (“a reality persists as long as its specific movements preserve between them a certain measure, and not by remaining immutable”).

²³ Just as Wittgenstein recognized in the preface to his *Tractatus*: “the second thing in which the value of this work consists is that it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved.” (transl. Pears and McGuinness, 1961, p. 4).

This seems to be an ontological solution of the riddle:²⁴ the permanence of the river is due to some regularity of its being; but this would not be Parmenides answer: for him, as for Heraclitus,²⁵ the identity of the river is a human convention. Men give the river its name, and continue to consider it the same object despite its changes. It is not a matter of ontology; it is a matter of language and of convenience: men consider it useful to identify that part of *being* as a single changing object, and name it 'river'. The same is the case of Epicarmos' riddle about the man who refuses to pay back his debts since, having changed, he is now another person (23B2.18–21). Plutarch (*d. sera num. vind.* 559A) calls it 'the argument of growth' (ὁ ἀυξόμενος λόγος). This argument appears a paradox only as far as we seek an ontological solution, but we do not need to do that: men keep the name as long as it suits them, and, clearly, it would be unpractical to accept the idea that a fellow loses his individuality simply because he becomes older or has a leg taken off.

The so-called paradoxes of Zeno do not appear paradoxical at all if we recognize that Zeno is a faithful disciple of Parmenides. Consider fragment 29 B 1: the majority of the authors interpret the argument as an infinite partition of a body.²⁶ However, the statement that an object becomes infinitely large if it is made by infinite parts is not a paradox at all, but only a false argument, devoid of any subtlety, and I do not think we should foist it on Zeno. Following a suggestion of Albertelli, 1939, p. 207, I advanced the opinion that Zeno does not speak of an object made by infinite parts, but he shows that a plurality of *beings* does not exist,

²⁴ See also Kirk, 1954, p. 366: "The preservation of the river identity and name, in spite of the constant change of its parts, is due to the regularity and balance of that change, just as the preservation of a κόσμος is due to the μέτρα which govern all meteorological and cosmological change".

²⁵ See Calenda, 2011, p. 78–84.

²⁶ See, among many others: Lee, 1932, p. 30; Booth, 1957, p. 6; Owen, 2001, p. 143; Vlastos, 1972, p. 132; Abraham, 1972, p. 41; Kirk et al., 1983, p. 267; McKirahan, 1994, p. 185; Hasper, 2006, p. 68 f.

since *being* is a compact continuum.²⁷ If a plurality of *beings* existed, we should be able to identify the limits of the individual *beings*. Each *being* must have dimensions (μέγεθος καὶ πάχος), so that one bit of it must be distant from another (καὶ ἀπέχειν αὐτοῦ τὸ ἕτερον ἀπὸ τοῦ ἑτέρου). Yet, since *being* is continuous, we can tell the same thing of what is 'projecting out' (περὶ τοῦ προύχοντος), that is, what lies immediately beyond the part we are considering first: it also has dimensions and something projects out of it (καὶ γὰρ ἐκεῖνο ἔξει μέγεθος καὶ προέξει αὐτοῦ τι). If we say it once, we can say it always, so the part we are examining expands further and further... and, since there is no *non-being* that divides one *being* from another, it is impossible to find boundaries that separate one part of *being* from another part. Therefore, there is no final limit (ἔσχατον) to the projecting out, and, in the vain attempt to find its limits, the part of the 'many' from which we have started our search, expands without limits. The final verses of the fragment – “οὕτως εἰ πολλά ἐστίν, ἀνάγκη αὐτὰ μικρά τε εἶναι καὶ μεγάλα· μικρὰ μὲν ὥστε μὴ ἔχειν μέγεθος, μεγάλα δὲ ὥστε ἄπειρα εἶναι” (“thus, if the many are, it is necessary for them to be small and large: so small not to have greatness, so great to be unlimited”) – suggest that there was a preceding argument that worked inward: we would not find the boundaries of a plurality of *beings* even if we looked for them inside the element we start from, rather than outside. In this case, the size of the element would shrink without limits, until the object would vanish; but, again, we would find no boundary. The conclusion is that, if we search for a plurality of *beings*, we will find that they become a single unlimited *being* or that they have no magnitude at all; but if they have no magnitude they do not exist, so only one *being* exists, which clearly is the Eleatic doctrine.

Several Zeno's arguments, summarized by other authors, are traditionally named 'against motion'. Some of these arguments do

²⁷ See Calenda, 2013, p. 129-130.

segment space and time in infinite elements. Let us examine the well known 'Achilles' (Arist. *Ph.* 239B.14): suppose, for simplicity sake, that the turtle starts 100 m in advance, that Achilles' speed is only twice that of the turtle, and that Achilles reaches the starting point of the turtle in one minute. Then Achilles reaches the turtle in two minutes having run 200 m. Zeno divides space and time in infinite elements, each half the length of the preceding one. The series still converges to two minutes and to 200 m in infinite steps; but, if the elements were real *beings*, Achilles would not be able to reach all of them, for they are infinite; so he would not reach the turtle, and time would not reach two minutes. Nevertheless, since Achilles reaches the turtle, it is impossible that the elements of this partition are true *beings*. To better visualize the argument, Thomson (Thomson 1955, 1-13) uses the example of a lamp that turns on and off at intervals of time that halve in succession: assuming that the first time interval is one minute, the sum of all the intervals converges to two minutes: after two minutes how is the light, on or off? There is no answer, because the process has no end, even if it has stopped after two minutes. Strictly speaking, the so-called arguments 'against motion' are not against motion at all: they use our perception of motion to prove that *being* is a single compact whole. We can understand these arguments as counterfactual thought experiments: they show that, if the objects conceived by us were the objective reality – that is, if *being* was composed of the plurality of elements which we recognize in it – we could conceive a partition of space in such a way as to make movement impossible. Parmenides would answer that the time intervals are not real *beings*, but only 'names' we give, a product of our mind, and what we have in mind does not change what is going on.²⁸ One might wonder why space should be segmented in such a perverse way, as to prevent Achilles from reaching the turtle; but this is precisely

²⁸ Thus, Parmenides answer would not be very far from that given by Aristotle, who makes use of the distinction between 'potency' and 'act' (*Phys.* VI 2, 233a 21).

the point: are the elements that we detect in the world separate *beings* in themselves, or is it only our mind that separates them? This might be the reason why Zeno's book included up to forty arguments (Procl. *In Parm.* 694.23; Elias, *In Cat.* 109.17): perhaps, by using a nearly exhaustive series of examples, he tried to show the contradictions in which one stumbles when admitting a plurality of *beings*.

After Parmenides

The main consequence of Parmenides epistemology (8.38–41) is that human knowledge reflects human needs, and anthropic and subjective points of view: it follows that distinct people are apt to arrange their own worldviews in different ways. Even when speaking about the same topic and using the same names for the same objects, two people never have exactly the same things in mind. This involves significant communication problems. As far as we know, neither Heraclitus nor Parmenides raised this issue: their attitude was mainly scientific, not operative. They were essentially concerned with epistemological questions: 'what is human knowledge?' or 'is it possible for men to reach certain truth?' The problem of communication arose well after them, but once raised it quickly became central for political, judicial, and professional reasons.

Unfortunately, Protagoras' writings are almost totally lost, but the *Men measure* fragment (80 B 1) has roots so deep, that they could even reach down to Parmenides. Each man is judge of his own beliefs, since each man organizes his worldview in his own way; thus, compelling proofs are unavailable, and the agreement, if any, is a matter of persuasion involving communication problems.

In the third thesis of his work '*On the Non-existent or On Nature*', Gorgias treats the same topic ([Arist.] *De MXG* 980B.8–14): the listener knows the words the speaker uses, and he recognizes them; but what he has in mind is not exactly the same as the speaker has in mind, since he

is not the same person, and his mental organization is different. Thus, communication between the speaker and the listener is complex, and if the speaker wants to persuade the listener, he has to know what he must say, in order to make the listener understand what he wants him to understand. This is the *καίριός* (what is proper for the occasion): to know the *καίριός* is the task of rhetoric. This also is, in my opinion, what Parmenides' epistemology eventually implies. If Gorgias had been Parmenides' son, unlike Plato he would not have felt the need to kill his father.

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