

Parmenides on Knowing What-is and What-is-not

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ABSTRACT: Parmenides presented himself to his audiences as one who had achieved a profound insight into the nature of *to eon* or “what-is.” In support of this claim he conducted an *elenchos* or “testing” of the ways of inquiry available for thinking, in the process revealing a set of informative *sēmata* or “signs.” In this respect Parmenides was speaking the language of discovery heard elsewhere in early Greek poetry. Similarly, his claim that we can neither learn nor know about what-is-not(hence must not say or think “it is not”) was justified by the ordinary meaning of the ancient Greek verbs for learning and knowing. Strikingly, Parmenides’ revisionary metaphysics rested in large measure on a widely shared view of what can be learned, known, and made known to others.

KEY-WORDS: descriptive metaphysics; revisionary metaphysics; knowing; learning; thinking; testing; discovery; signs; what-is; what-is-not; elenchos; sēma; oida; gignōskō; manthano; punthanomai; noēō; Aristotle; Homer; Parmenides

RESUMO: Parmênides se apresenta ao seu público como alguém que alcançou um profundo discernimento da natureza de *to eon* ou “o-que-é”. Para sustentar essa posição ele efetuou um *elenchos* ou “prova” dos caminhos de inquirito disponíveis para pensar, identificando e depois usando, durante o processo, um conjunto de *sēmata* ou “signos” informativos. A esse respeito, Parmênides falava a linguagem da descoberta que ouvira na antiga poesia grega. Do mesmo modo, sua afirmação de que nós não podemos nem aprender e nem conhecer o-que-não-é (logo, não devemos dizer ou pensar “não é”) era justificada pelo sentido comum dos antigos verbos gregos para aprender e conhecer. De maneira impressionante, a metafísica revisionista de Parmênides se apoiava em grande medida na visão amplamente compartilhada daquilo que pode ser aprendido, conhecido e tornar conhecido a outros.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: metafísica descritiva; metafísica revisionista; conhecimento; aprendizagem; pensamento; testagem; descoberta; sinais; que-é; que-não-é; *elénkhos*; *sēma*; *oida*; *gignōsko*; *manthano*; *punthánomai*; *noēo*; Aristóteles; Homero; Parmênides.

Introduction

We know from various texts that Aristotle based his account of *to on* or “being” on a set of assumptions concerning the distinguishing features of the primary reality (a.k.a. substance). As he states at *Categories* 2a11, “Substance is that which is neither said of a subject nor present in a subject.” Also, according to *Categories* 4a10, “It seems most distinctive of substance that what is numerically one and the same is able to receive contraries.” Furthermore, according to *Metaphysics* 1028–29, substance is most of all what something is, i.e. what is knowable and definable, and, finally, it is what is separable and individual, a particular “this.” The truth of each of these characterizations of substance is not beyond dispute, nor is it clear that any of the main contenders for the title (matter, form, and the compound of the two) can consistently possess all the requisite hallmarks (combining individuality with knowability turned out to be especially problematic). But it is at least clear how Aristotle carried out his “inquiry into being”: armed with a set of hallmarks of primary reality, he reviewed the claims of the most promising contenders and declared a winner. It was, to put it in modern terms, an extended exercise in “descriptive metaphysics.”¹

¹ For the distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics, see P. F. Strawson, 1959, 9–12. According to Strawson, descriptive metaphysics consists in identifying those concepts or categories we employ in thinking about the world and the relationships that hold among them. Strawson identifies Aristotle and Kant as descriptive metaphysicians; Descartes, Leibniz, and Berkeley as revisionary ones; and Hume as sometimes one and sometimes the other. Strawson does not mention Parmenides in this connection, which seems an oversight. As Kahn observed, “Parmenides may reasonably be regarded as the founder of ontology and metaphysics at once. For he is the first to have articulated the concept of Being or Reality as a distinct topic for philosophic discussion.” (Kahn 1969, 700).

How different, in this respect, was Parmenides' approach to determining the nature² of *to eon* or "what-is." Not only did he not begin by specifying the attributes any primary reality must possess, he criticized ordinary ways of speaking and thinking about what-is as shot through with error: mortals "wander two-headed, knowing nothing," "helpless," "like deaf and blind men," "hordes devoid of judgment," etc. (B 6.5-7).³ This gives rise to a puzzle: if Parmenides held that the concepts we commonly employ in speaking of what-is are infected with error, on what basis could he have regarded any one conception of what-is as superior to another? In what follows I argue: (1) that Parmenides' revisionary account of the nature of what-is rested not on a view of the attributes any primary reality must possess, but rather on an eliminative review of the possible ways in which we can think about what-is; (2) that the key elements in this review were the organizing of an *elenchos* or testing of the only ways of thinking available for inquiry into what-is and the production of a set of *sémata* or signs indicative of its nature; (3) that in so far as discovery by means of a testing procedure and the disclosure of signs occurs elsewhere in early Greek poetry, Parmenides' audience would have considered it an appropriate and effective method for establishing the nature of what-is; and (4) that Parmenides' critique of the "is-not" way of speaking and thinking was similarly based on the common understanding of the meaning of the ancient Greek verbs for learning and knowing.

²*Phusis* ("nature") appears only in the "opinion" section of Parmenides' poem, although Bicknell argues that B10 with its reference to *phusis* formed part of the *proemium* (Bicknell 1968, 629-631). The appropriateness of *phusis* as designating the subject of Parmenides' inquiry is now generally accepted (see Mourelatos 2008, 62-63); and P. Curd, 2004, 41-43 and 196-98).

³It is unclear whether Parmenides was criticizing human thought in general or the views of the earlier inquirers into nature. At B 7.4, for example, he speaks broadly of "know-nothing mortals (*brotoi*)", but the errors he identifies at B 8-9 (e.g. "that the path of all things is backward-turning") sound more like views held by one or more of his philosophical/scientific predecessors.

Parmenides' Claim to Knowledge

It is striking how often, from the opening lines of Parmenides' poem forward, that the topic of conversation is the sources and methods associated with acquiring *knowledge*. In the *proemium* of fragment B 1, Parmenides explains, in suitably elevated language, how a *kouros* or "youth" (perhaps Parmenides himself at an earlier date) achieved a profound insight into the nature of reality.⁴ He begins by identifying the powers that guided his thinking and the rich source of information to which he was afforded access:

The mares that carry me were escorting me as far as mind might reach (*epi thumos hikanoi*) when, as they were leading me, they set me on the song-rich roadway of the goddess which bears the knowing man (*eidota phôta*) down to every town. (B 1.1-3)

Unfortunately, these lines give rise to many difficult questions. What powers do the mares represent? What sort of faculty is the *thumos*? Is the goddess' roadway one that is "rich in voice or song" (i.e. a rich source of inspiration) or is it one that is "much-voiced or sung" (i.e. renowned)? Who is or was "the knowing man"? And—in a notorious crux — is he carried "down to every town" (*kata pant' astê*), "straight ahead" (*antên*), "unscathed" (*asinê*), or even "through every deception" (*atê*)?⁵ More broadly, does Parmenides speak of travelling along the roadway of a goddess as a bow to poetic tradition, or is he sincerely acknowledging the receipt of a divine revelation, or is he crediting his insights to the exercise of his own intellectual powers, or is he simultaneously doing all three things? In addition, does Parmenides here represent himself as an already knowledgeable traveler like

⁴ Quotations from Parmenides are based on the Greek text in H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. 6th edition, 3 volumes. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1951-52). All translations are my own.

⁵ For fourteen proposed emendations and a defense of *kata pant' a<s>tê*, see J. Lesher, 1994, 6n.

Odysseus (who “saw the cities and came to know the mind of many men”)? Or is he drawing upon the language of Greek mystery religion to speak of himself as an initiate or “knowing one”? Or is he speaking more broadly of the sources of inspiration available to him as they are available to inspired poets everywhere?⁶ Fortunately, it is sufficient for our purposes merely to note the positive epistemic⁷ outlook shared across these interpretive options. However literally we may choose to take the references to aiding deities, and whoever “the knowing man” might turn out to be, we can hardly be mistaken in thinking that Parmenides here presents himself to his audience as one who has achieved an insight into the nature of reality superior to that previously attained by any mortal being.⁸ But what basis might Parmenides have had for making such an assertion?

Parmenides begins by speaking of his *thumos* —his mind⁹— as it was engaged in far-reaching reflection at some earlier date. He then alludes to a divinity who played the key role in his philosophical education. We are also given a clue to the contents of that education when “much-revealing” or “much-directed” horses (*poluphrastoi hippoi*) are said to carry him, with maidens (soon to be identified as Daughters of the Sun) leading the way. These female deities escort the youth to a

⁶For defenses of these options see R. Renehan, Review of Coxon 1986 in *Ancient Philosophy* 12 (1992) 395-409; Burkert 1969, 1-30; and Leshner 1994, 8-16, respectively.

⁷ By ‘epistemic’ I mean simply ‘relating to knowledge.’ Neither *epistēmē* nor *epistamai* appears in any surviving Parmenides fragment. This is consistent with the account given in Lyons which contrasts the environments (in Plato’s dialogues) in which *epistasthai* and *gignóskein* occur and regards *eidenai* as convertible with both. See J. Lyons 1963.

⁸Similarly, G. Kirk, J. Raven, and M. Schofield 1983, 243: “Parmenides’ chief purpose in these lines is to lay claim to knowledge of a truth not attained by the ordinary run of mortals.”

⁹ The *thumos* is commonly that which prompts action through desire or appetite, but it is also that by or through which a person thinks, knows, and receives instruction. See Liddell, H. and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. H. Jones and R. McKenzie, with the 1968 Supplement, 9th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), s. v. *thumos* II 6 [Henceforth cited as LSJ]. See also the discussion in S. Darcus 1977, 178-182. Cf. “Now I will prophesy to you as the immortals put it in my *thumos*” (*Od.* 1.200). Similarly, in fr. 67a (Diehl) Archilochus urges his *thumos* to “know (*gignóske*) what kind of rhythm holds humankind in its sway.”

great gateway and persuade Justice to remove the bar and open wide the doors. At B 1.28–30 the goddess welcomes the youth to her house and declares it “no evil fate” but “right and justice” that he should have undertaken this journey to a distant realm, declaring that he:

Needs must learn (*puthesthai*) all things, both an unshaking heart (*atremes êtor*)¹⁰ of very persuasive truth (*alêtheiês eupitheôs*)¹¹ and the beliefs of mortals (*brotôn doxas*) in which there is no true trust (*pistis alêthês*).

On one plausible, demythologized, reading, we are here being told that the powers that enabled Parmenides to achieve his profound insight into the nature of reality were allied with what will soon be identified as the fundamental substance light/night.¹² It is sun-related deities who, having left the house of Night for the light, lead the youth to an understanding of the nature of what-is, elevating him above fluctuating and contradictory common conceptions of what there is. Additional details such as the chariot’s glowing axle, high-pitched sound, well-rounded wheels (B 1.6–9), and straight path (B 1.20–22) all testify to the enormity of the powers of control exercised by those guiding forces.

At B 1.31–32 the goddess introduces the important idea of a procedure capable of exposing the errors in mortal opinion as well as providing a basis on which to identify with complete assurance the correct path of inquiry:

¹⁰ Many believe that *atremes êtor* designates “the unshaking heart of reality,” in effect “the central core of what-is.” But there is no definite article in Parmenides’ text, and like *thumos*, *êtor* was associated with thought as well as the emotions. (Cf. *LSJ* s.v. *êtor* and the discussion in S. Sullivan 1995, 17–38. Cf. Homer, *Il.* 1.188; Pindar, *Ol.* 2.79 etc.)

¹¹As Coxon explains, *eupitheôs* provides the necessary antithesis to *têis ouk eni pistis alêthês* (Coxon 2009, 284).

¹²Following Coxon, *Fragments*, 14: “...Parmenides’ description of himself as drawn by sagacious mares guided by solar divinities is of one piece with his later representation of the divine powers in the physical world; both are imaginative projections of phenomenal realities analyzable ultimately in the two Forms light and night.” Similarly, D. Gallop 1984, 7: “The setting of his revelation neatly encapsulates its contents.”

Nevertheless, you will learn even these (*kai tauta mathêseai*), how the things believed to be (*ta dokounta*) had to certifiably be (*chrên dokimôs einai*), all passing through all.¹³

Here again Parmenides' remarks give rise to many difficult questions. Should we understand the phrase "the things believed" *de re* or *de dicto* (i.e. as referring to a set of *things* or to a set of *beliefs* about things)?¹⁴ And when Parmenides speaks of "how they had to certifiably be" does he mean how they needed to achieve that objective and did so, or how they needed to achieve that objective but failed to do so?

Fortunately, we can gain some leverage on this question from the notion of "certifiably being" (*dokimôs einai*) introduced at B 1.32. As Mourelatos and others have noted¹⁵, the adjective *dokimos* applies to some person or thing that has been subjected to examination and established as authentic or genuine.¹⁶ Similarly, being in a way that is *dokimôs* (either existing in some manner or possessing some attribute) involves being subjected to an examination and passing "with flying colors." Thus, we should anticipate that in the ensuing discussion, one way of speaking and thinking about what-is will be subjected to scrutiny and survive the examination, while a second way will be examined and found wanting.

¹³ The text and proper translation of B 1.32 are matters of dispute. I read *pantos panta perônta* and take "all passing through all" as an allusion to the fully realized character of what-is, i.e. that it is never "not" in any respect. Not only does the goddess assert that what-is is "all full" (B 8.24: *pan empleon*), but in the *doxa* section she also affirms that "all is full (*pan pleon*) of light and night together, of both equally, since neither is mixed in with nothing" (B 9.3-4: *oudeterôi meta mêden*). For a plausible account of the positive character of the *doxa* section, see T. Johansen 2016, 1-29.

¹⁴ One might suppose that what is about to take place is a review of the sorts of *things* that stand some chance of achieving the status of certified realities, yet *tauta* seems to refer back to the *brotôn doxas* or "opinions of mortals" just mentioned at B1.30.

¹⁵ See the discussion in Mourelatos 2008, 200.

¹⁶ In Xenophon, *Institutio Cyri*. 1.6.7, the *dokimos* man is the genuinely brave or good man, one who has been put to the test and not found wanting: *dokimos kalos kagathos*. In Aeschylus' *Persians* (7) being *dokimos* results from having been proved valiant in battle. In fable 200 Aesop speaks alternatively of a *dokimasia* and *peira* or "trial." *Dokimasia* and *dokimadzein* were also used in the context of determining eligibility for citizenship.

Nowhere in the ensuing discussion is the notion of a process of examination and certification more evident than in fragment B 7.3-6:

Nor let habit force you to ply down this road an aimless eye and echoing ear and tongue, but judge by reasoning the much-contested testing (*poludêrin elenchon*) spoken by me.¹⁷

In B 2 the goddess had introduced what she characterized as the only ways of inquiry available for thinking¹⁸: “the one that it is and is not possible for it not to be” and the other, “that it is not and needs must not be.”¹⁹ She immediately declared the first way to be worthy of acceptance, but dismissed the second as “wholly beyond learning” (*panapeuthea*)²⁰. Over the course of B 8 she will present a series of arguments, characterized as *sêmata* or “signs”, intended to establish that “in so far as it is (*eon*), it is un-generated and imperishable, whole, of a single kind, steadfast, and complete.”²¹ Thus, in accordance with the

¹⁷ For a defense of *elenchos* as “test” or “testing” see J. Leshner 1984, 1-30. Cf. “The bow is no *elenchos* of a man, it is a coward’s weapon; the real man stands in the ranks and dares to face the spear” (Euripides, *Heracles*, 162-63) and “For many tales have been told, and in many ways, but to put one’s new creations to the test by a touchstone (*basônôî es elenchon*) is altogether risky” (Pindar, *Nem.* 8.20-1).

¹⁸ The meaning of *noeô* is contested, but I follow Coxon, Barnes, and others in regarding *noêsai* here at B 2.2, and the other instances of *noeô* (B 3.1, B 6.1, B 8.8, B 8.34, and B 8.36) as properly translated by “think”(or as Coxon sometimes prefers, “conceive”). In Homer, finite forms of the aorist (e.g. *enoësan*) can mean “note” or “take notice of” (cf. *Od.* 22.32: *to de népioi ouk enoësan*), arguably implying knowing, but *noêsai* here (and for comparison at *Il.* 1.343-44: *noêsai hama prossô kai opissô*) makes sense with “thinking” but not with “knowing.”

¹⁹ *Chreôn* at B 2.5 connotes both necessity and propriety (Cf. LSJ s.v. *chreôn* II and III).

²⁰ *Manthanô* focuses on the changes taking place in the mind or behavior of the individual while *punthanomai* focuses on the means by which information has come to the individual (cf. LSJ I, 1: “to learn something from a person”). Accordingly, the related adjective *panapeuthea* means “wholly incapable of being learned about from some external source.”

²¹ Accepting Owen’s proposed reading of *oulon mounogenes te kai atremes êde teleion*. Some translators take *eon* at B 8.3 to be the subject of the sentence (“What-is is un-generated, etc.”). I follow Guthrie in reading *eon* as a circumstantial participle: “In so far as it is (*eon*), it is eternal, indivisible, etc.” This reading accords with Parmenides’ view that what-is is what it is in virtue of itself. I follow McKirahan in identifying the *sêmata* as the arguments rather than the various attributes established by the arguments.

goddess' directive to "judge by reasoning the much-contested testing", the "it is and is not possible not to be" way of speaking and thinking is put to the test and survives scrutiny ("still single remains the story that it is" — *monos d'eti muthos leipetai hōs estin*)²², while the "it is not and needs must not be" way has been put to the test and found wanting ("to let go the one as not to be thought of and nameless (*anoēton, anōnumon*), for it is no true way" (*ou gar alêthēs estin hodos*, B 8.17-18).

The evidence, though incomplete and contested at many points, supports the conclusion that Parmenides set out to discover and make known to others the nature of what-is by conducting a critical review of the ways of thinking available for inquiry into the nature of what-is, in the process generating a set of reasons for believing it to be eternal, indivisible, unmoving, and complete in all respects "like the bulk of a well-rounded sphere." But why, we can still ask, would Parmenides have supposed that in presenting an account of this sort he would have justified his claim to have discovered and revealed to others the nature of what-is?

The Language of Discovery in Early Greek Poetry

To appreciate the rationale underlying Parmenides' approach we must broaden our focus to consider how his predecessors and contemporaries spoke of discovering who or what someone or something is. Five ancient Greek expressions figure prominently in this broader story: *gignōskō*, *oīda*, *elenchos*, *peira*, and *sēma*.

For *gignōskō* the standard Greek lexicon (LSJ) offers "come to know, perceive, know, discern, distinguish, recognize, learn, perceive that, feel that, be aware of, perceive to be, know to be, take to mean that,

²² Which is to say: "single remains the way that it is" (a case of transferred epithet).

form a judgment, think that, and understand”, as well as the extended meanings of “determine or decide, know carnally, and make known.”²³ The meaning of the basic *gnô-* element is thought to have been “notice” or “take note of”, with the present tense formed by reduplication on the aorist form *gnônai* with the addition of the inceptive element *skô-*. *Gignôskô* occurs only once in Parmenides’ poem when (at B 2.7) the goddess states that “you certainly (*ge*) cannot know (*gnoiês*) what-is-not”²⁴, but on this assertion rests the important conclusion that the “is not” way of speaking and thinking lies “wholly beyond learning.”

Forms of *oida* appear at various points in Parmenides’ poem²⁵, as one would expect for the most commonly used and most general ancient Greek ‘knowledge verb’. As a perfect form of *eidô* (“see”), *oida* originally designated a knowledge gained through seeing²⁶, but even in Homer the verb could be used in connection with knowing through other means.²⁷ Not only did *oida* cover the range of cognitive achievements designated by *epistamai* and *gignôskô*, it was also the natural verb to use in speaking of one who (either rightly or wrongly) claimed to possess knowledge on a variety of matters.²⁸ Thus, when in *Iliad* 2 the singer praises the Muses who are his source of information, he proclaims *iste te*

²³ In the standard edition of LSJ the meaning of “know” was restricted to past tense uses of *gignôskô*, but this error was corrected in the 1968 supplement.

²⁴ There is also one occurrence of the related noun *gnômê* (“thought, judgment, opinion, decision, saying,” literally: “a means of knowing”) at the outset of the *doxa* section (“so that no *gnome* of mortals shall overtake you”).

²⁵ At B 1.3, B 6.4, B 8.53, B 10.1, and B 10.5. Parmenides also makes implicit reference to attaining knowledge through the use of *punthanomai* (at B 1.28, B 2.6, and B 10.4) and *manthanô* (at B 1.31).

²⁶ For example, *Od.* 16.470: ‘I know (*oida*) for I saw it with my eyes (*ophthalmoisin*).’

²⁷ Compare Aeneas’ remark to Achilles in *Il.* 20.203 ff.: “We know (*idmen*) each other’s lineage and each other’s parents, for we have heard the tales told in olden days by mortal men, but not with sight of eyes have you seen my parents nor I yours.”

²⁸ For *oida* LSJ (s.v. *eidô* B) gives “see with mind’s eye, know, have knowledge of, be acquainted with, know of, be assured of, have in one’s heart, be disposed, have cunning with, acknowledge, know how to do, be in a condition, be able, have the power, know that such and such is the fact.”

panta (“you know all things”, *Il.* 2.485). We also hear of the seer Calchas, who “knew (*éidē*) all the things that were, that were to be, and that had been before” (*Il.* 2.70–71). Athena describes herself and her ward Odysseus as “knowing (*eidotes*) all manner of devices” (*Od.* 13.296–297). Similarly, Hesiod’s authorities, the Muses, proclaimed that “we know (*idmen*) how to speak many false things as though they were true, but we know (*idmen*) when we wish, how to utter true things” (*Theogony*, 27–28).

Forms of *gignôskô* and *oida* occur from time to time in early Greek poetry in connection with the performance of a test or trial of some kind (designated either by the nouns *elenchos*, *peira*, or *diapeira*, or by the verbs *elenchô*, *peiradzô*, and *diapeiraomai*) in the context of discovering the identity or nature of a person or thing.²⁹ For example, when in *Iliad* 8 Zeus threatens to hurl into Tartarus any god he catches giving aid to either side of the conflict at Troy, he boasts that such an act will reveal the magnitude of his powers:

Then you shall know (*gnôsete*) just how mighty among the gods I am. But come, gods, make trial (*peirêsasthe*) so you will all know (*eidete*, *Il.* 8.18).

In the *Iliad*, the relevant form of testing is typically a trial by arms:

But come, make trial (*peirêsai*), so that these too may know (*gnôôsî*)
Straightway your dark blood will flow around my spear (*Il.* 1.302–03).

While in the *Odyssey*, the testing often takes the form of an athletic competition:

²⁹In *Ol.* 4.17–18 Pindar links the two terms: “This is a word that will never be tainted with falsehood: Trial (*diapeira*) is the test (*elenchos*) or mortals”, i.e. athletic competition is the true test of personal excellence.

But I wish to know (*idmen*) and try them (*peirêthêmenai*) face to face. (*Od.* 8.213).³⁰

The association of knowing with testing is not peculiar to the Homeric poems, as is clear from Theognis' announcement:

This is the hardest of all things to know (*gnônai*), for neither the mind of man nor of woman shall you know (*eideiês*) until you have made trial of it (*peirêtheiês*)...because outward shapes do so often cheat the understanding (124-128).

Similarly, Alcman 67: "Trial (*peira*) surely is the beginning of learning (*archa mathêsios*)"³¹ and Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (590-591): "Knowing (*eidenai*) must come through action. You will never be sure unless you put it to the test (*echois an gnôma mê peirômenê*)."³² When in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Tauris* (1178-1179) Iphigenia is asked "how she learned (*egnôs*) of the foreigner's stain", she replies: "I examined him" (*élenchon*).

Gignôskô and *oida* also occur from time to time in connection with the disclosure of an informative *sêma*, which is not surprising since the *sêma* is typically that which makes identification possible.³² Thus, when in *Iliad* 7 the Greek warriors cast lots to see who will face Hector:

Ajax held forth his hand, and the herald drew near and laid the lot therein; and he knew at a glance the token on the lot (*gnô de klêrou sêma idôn*), and rejoiced at heart. (*Il.* 7.189)

³⁰For additional instances of knowing linked with a trial or testing: *Il.* 1.302; 7.300; 22.381-82; in addition to the multiple occurrences of forms of *peiradzô* during Odysseus' multiple disclosures of his identity in *Od.* 13 to 24.

³¹In a similar vein are the frequent contrasts of the appearance of virtue with the real thing, as discovered through a testing process: "Repute is a great ill unto man, trial (*peira*) is best; many are reputed good that have never been tried. When thou shalt come to the test (*es basanon*) and be rubbed beside lead, it will be manifest (*dêlon*) to all men that thou art pure gold"(Theognis, 1104-06).

³²LSJ defines *sêma* as "sign, token, mark, by means of which anything is identified" (cf. *Il.* 23.455, where it is a star-shaped mark which identifies a particular horse, and *Il.* 2.814 and 7.86 where it is a memorializing burial mound). There is no established etymology for *sêma*.

Nowhere in early Greek poetry do we find a more sustained reflection on the dynamics of discovery than in the concluding books of the *Odyssey*. As early as Book 13 Athena had warned Odysseus:

Eagerly would another man on his return from wanderings hasten to behold in his halls his children and his wife; but you are not to know or learn anything, (*daēmenai oude puthesthai*) until you have tested (*peiréseai*) your wife, who abides as of old in your walls. (*Od.* 13.334–337)

The final stage of the process of disclosure begins when Odysseus tests Eumaeus to determine his loyalty (cf. *peirêtidzôn* at 14.459 and 15.304), and continues on with a proposal to test the farmhands (cf. *peirêtheimen* at 16.305). At *Od.* 21.217 Odysseus encounters the swineherds and declares that he will give them a manifest sign (*sêma ariphrades*) so they “may well know him and be assured in their heart” (*eu gnôton pistôthêton r’eni thumôi*.)” Next comes the recognition of Odysseus by his faithful dog Argos (*Od.* 17.301), Penelope’s recognition of the clothing described by the beggar as sure signs of Odysseus’ identity (*sêmat’ anagnousêi ta hoi empeda pephrad’ Odysseus*, *Od.* 19.250), the detection of the scar by the nurse Eurycleia (*Od.* 19.392 and 468; also spoken of as a *sêma ariphrades* at *Od.* 23.72), and, finally, Penelope’s interrogation of Odysseus. As Penelope explains to Telemachus:

But if he really is (*eteon*) Odysseus, and has come home, we two shall surely know one another (*gnôsometh’ allêlôn*) more certainly, for we have signs (*sêmath’*) which we two alone know (*idmen*), signs hidden from others. So she spoke, and the much-enduring, goodly Odysseus smiled, and straightway spoke to Telemachus winged words: Telemachus, suffer now your mother to test (*peiradzein*) me in the halls; presently shall she win more certain knowledge (*phrasetai*). (*Od.* 23.108–114)

When Penelope directs the chambermaid to make up the bed lying outside the bridal chamber, Odysseus erupts in anger at the

suggestion that anyone could have moved the massive bed he had built (*Od.* 23.182-204). And this gives Penelope the sign she had been waiting for:

So he spoke, and her knees were loosened where she sat, and her own heart (*étor*) melted, as she recognized the sure signs which Odysseus showed her (*sémat' anagnouséi ta empeda pephrad'*). (206-207)³³

To sum up: the discovery (cf. *anagnóskein*, *gignóskein*, *gnóston*, and *eidenai*) of Odysseus' identity occurs in connection with a testing process (*peiradzein*), a disclosure (*phradzein*) of a set of clear or sure signs (*empeda sémata*), a determination of reality (*eteon*), and the achieving of complete persuasion or conviction (*pistôthêton*) in mind (*thumos*) and heart (*étor*). Thus, when Parmenides put forward his account of the nature of what-is by putting the available ways of thinking to a test, in the process disclosing a set of persuasive indicators of the nature of what-is, he was speaking in a way his audience would have recognized as an appropriate and effective way of discovering the nature or identity of a thing or person.

Knowing, Learning, and Thinking about What-Is-Not

Why, then, did Parmenides' goddess repudiate the alternative "it is not and needs must not be" way of speaking and thinking? It is important to note that she did not do so because it is *an impossible way* or *no way at all*, but rather "because it is *no true way*" (*ou gar aléthês estin hodos*, B 8.17-18). At the outset of B 2 she characterized the "it is not

³³ There are two later references to *sémata*: at *Od.* 23.272 when Odysseus reaches the point in his travels when the inhabitants mistake an oar for a winnowing fan, and at *Od.* 24.329, when Odysseus mentions his childhood wound in response to his father's request for a *séma ariphrades* to prove he is Odysseus.

and needs must not be” way as one of two ways of inquiry that “are for” (or “are available for”) thinking (*didzēsios eisi noēsai*, B 2.2). And while she repudiates the “is not” way, she never denies the possibility that someone might travel along it. Although it is declared to be a way “wholly beyond learning” (*panapeuthea*), it nevertheless remains a way of speaking and thinking that is available to mortals (as exemplified by the behavior of the confused know-nothing mortals of B 6).³⁴ The same conclusion follows from the goddess’ repeated admonitions to the *kouros*: “I will not *allow* (*eassô*) you to say” (B 8.7), “*restrain* (*eirge*) your thought” (B 7.2), and “*let go* the one as not to be thought of and nameless” (*ean anoêton anônumon*, B 8.17).³⁵ The goddess would hardly have enjoined the youth from performing an action she considered it impossible for him to perform.

Why, then, does the goddess enjoin the youth to keep his mind away from the “it is not and needs must not be” way? Her immediate explanation is that no learning will ever come from saying or thinking “it is not and needs must not be”, but this claim rests in turn on the assertion that it is impossible to know what-is-not (or nothing) as well as impossible to make it known to others:

That I point out to you to be a path wholly beyond learning (*panapeuthea*),
For you could certainly not know what-is-not (*oute gar an gnoiês to gemê eon*), for that cannot be accomplished (*ou gar anuston*), nor can you make it known (*oute phrasais*). (B 2.6–8)

The connection between thinking and saying “it is not and needs

³⁴ I agree with those (Curd, Cordero, and Nehamas, among others) who have rejected the three-ways view in favor of a two-ways understanding of the possible paths of inquiry. In other words, I believe that the lacuna at B 6.3 is more plausibly filled by something along the lines of *archô* rather than by *eirge*.

³⁵ It is important to note that *anoêton* and *anônumon* are properly translated here as “not to be thought” and “unnamed” rather than as “unthinkable” and “un-nameable”—which would render the is-not way of thinking and speaking not so much mistaken as impossible. For verbal adjectives (here *anoêton* and *phaton* and *noêton* at B 8.8) as expressing “that the state of affairs can or *deserves to be done*” [emphasis mine], A. Rijksbaron 2002, 143.

must not be” and thinking of what-is-not will emerge over the course of the proofs presented in B 8.

The logic of the goddess’s argument is most clearly evident in the first of the four *sémata* — the argument against coming-into-being at B 8.6–21.³⁶ Coming-into-being represents one of four possible ways of thinking and saying of what-is that it “is not and needs must not be” at some particular place, time, or respect. If what-is came into being at some time in the past (or is now coming into being or at some point will come into being), then there must be some time during which what-is either was not, is not, or will not be — otherwise we could not truly speak of what-is as *coming into* being. But if this is so, then (since there is nothing else besides what is) what-is would have to come into being from (or “out of”) what-is-not (*ek mé eontos*). But how could what-is ever come from what-is-not? What could have caused this to happen sooner rather than later, starting from nothing (*tou médenos*)? Thus, ‘coming into being is extinguished (*apesbestai*) and perishing is unheard of (*apustos*).

Like each of the other proofs, the argument against coming-into-being proceeds by considering whether it is possible to say and think of what-is that it is not (at some time or place or in some respect). It becomes evident that this would imply that at some place, time, or respect, there is, was, or will be what-is-not. And what Parmenides concludes in the light of this realization is not so much the absurdity of such a development but rather the complete absence of information available to any one contemplating this situation. For if at some time there was only nothing, then there is nothing from which anyone can learn how or why what-is came into being when it did rather than at

³⁶ R. McKirahan (2008) offers a useful detailed analysis of the arguments that make up much of B 8. He does not, however, attempt to determine the soundness of the arguments since some of the supporting claims (e.g. the claim of the unknowability of what-is-not in B 2) fall outside the scope of his investigation.

some earlier or later time.³⁷ In short, thinking “it is and cannot not be” connects with what-is, but thinking “it is not and needs must not be” gets you nowhere.³⁸

At several points the goddess reinforces her repudiation of the “it is not and needs must not be” way by affirming a close connection between “being there” and “being available for speaking and thinking.” This at least is one way in which to understand the multiply interpreted B 3: “for the same thing is there for thinking and for being”, which to say that what is “there for being” or “available for being” is also “there for thinking” or “available for thinking”, but what is not “there for being” cannot be “there for thinking.” Similarly, at B4, the goddess enjoins the youth to “Gaze upon things which though are far off are nevertheless firmly present to the mind, because you cannot cut off parts of what-is from what-is,” which is to say that because what-is is “there” without gaps or pauses it is also there for us to “gaze” upon in our minds³⁹, even in connection with things that are in some sense “far off.” An intimate connection between thought and what-is is also affirmed at B 8.1-2:

It must be that what is there for speaking and thinking is, for it
[what-is] is there to be,
Whereas nothing is not.

The relationship between thought and being is also the subject of

³⁷ The arguments against divisibility, motion, and qualitative change also maintain that each of these developments would in some way imply the existence of what-is-not (cf. B 8.33: “for it [what-is] is not lacking, but what-is-not would lack everything” and B 8.46: “for neither is there what-is-not which could stop it from reaching its like”).

³⁸ Parmenides’ adjective *amustos* (“accomplished”) connotes arriving at an objective (from *amuō-* “accomplish, finish a journey, make one’s way, come to an end”). Since the “is-not” way lacks an objective, it contrasts sharply with the “it is and cannot not be” way, which ‘closely follows upon reality’ (*alētheiēi...opēdei*, B 2.4).

³⁹ In Homer *leussō* can mean either “direct one’s sight” (e.g. *Il.5.771*) or “think about, bring to mind” (e.g. *Il.3.110: prossō kai opissōleussei*). Given the goddess’ admonition to avoid using the senses, we should understand the imperative *leusse* here to mean “ponder,” “reflect,” “think,” etc.

B 8.35–36:

The same thing is there for thinking and because of which
 there is thought; for
 Not without what-is, on which it depends, will you find
 thinking, for nothing else
 Either is or will be besides what-is.

These remarks collectively affirm, in largely consistent wording, that significant speech and thought must have what-is as their object in so far as what-is-not is simply “not available” for anyone to speak or think about.

Lastly, why did the goddess assert that knowing what-is-not “cannot be accomplished”? Here again Parmenides was able to draw on a body of knowledge available to the members of his audience—in this case, their everyday understanding of the forms of awareness typically designated by *gignóskō*. A person could know – *gignóskein* —invisually detecting the presence of a person or thing:

And the mist I have taken from your eyes so that you might
 well discern (*gignóskéis*) both god and man (*Il.* 5.127–128).
 But of Tydeus' son you could not make out (*ouk an gnoiês*)
 with which of the two he was joined, whether it was with the
 Trojans or the Achaeans (*Il.* 5.84–86).

One could also know – *gignóskein* — in ascertaining the identity of the person or thing one has encountered:

Achilles turned and immediately knew (*egnô*) Pallas Athena (*Il.* 1.205–206).
 It belongs to all men to know (*gignóskein*) themselves, and to
 think wisely (Heraclitus, B 116).

One could also know – *gignóskein* — in ascertaining the nature of the person, thing, event, or activity one has observed:

I knew (*egnô*) as I looked upon him that he was a bird of omen
(*Od.15.532*)

Many were the men whose cities he saw and whose mind he
came to know (*egnô*, *Od. 1.3*).

And one could also know – *gignôskein* — in recognizing an
individual one already knows:

To the wise-hearted son of Tydeus do I liken him in all things,
recognizing (*gignôskôn*) him by his shield and his crested helm
(*Il. 5.182-183*).

Stop. Don't beat him, for it is the soul of a friend I recognized
(*egnôn*) upon hearing him cry out. (Heraclitus quoting
Xenophanes speaking about Pythagoras, B 7.)

One could not, however, know – *gignôskein* — what-is-not, since
it is impossible to visually detect its presence, ascertain its identity or
specific nature, or recognize it as an individual one already knows. The
same holds true for *phradzein*: it is impossible to make known, tell, show,
or point out to others that which has neither identifying *sémata* nor
nature.⁴⁰ In short, the goddess declares the “it is not and needs must not
be” way of speaking and thinking to be a way “from which no learning
can ever come” because each of the four “it is not” ways makes a
commitment to the reality of what-is-not (or nothing), and there can be
neither *punthanesthai* nor *gignôskein* nor *phradzein* in connection with
what-is-not (or nothing).

⁴⁰ It was therefore no accident that when Democritus claimed that what-is exists “no more than” what-is-not he held that what-is-not (or the void) has a nature and can also serve to explain phenomena: “Democritus openly declared that what-is is no more than what-is-not, and both are equally causes of things that come to be...what-is-not, he declares, is no less than what-is” (Simplicius in A 38). See the discussion in Curd 2004, 188-192. Both Plato and Aristotle take it as a given that there can be no *gignôskein* and *eidēnai* in connection with what-is-not (see *Republic*, 476e-477a, *Sophist* 238c, and Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 92b5-8).

Conclusion

Parmenides justified his claim to have achieved a profound insight into the nature of what-is by drawing upon a set of epistemic resources he shared with the members of his audiences. Subjecting the ways of speaking and thinking available for inquiry to an *elenchus* and disclosing a set of revelatory *sémata* was a procedure his audience would have recognized as an appropriate and effective way in which to determine the identity or nature of a person or thing. In addition, because it was not possible to know — *gignóskein* — in connection with what-is-not, no learning could ever come from thinking and speaking of it — what-is-not is simply not there for anyone to think of or about. And since coming-into-being, destruction, divisibility, movement, and change all commit one to the existence of what-is-not, we must say and think that what-is is eternal, indivisible, unmoving, unchanging, and complete in every way “like the bulk of a well-rounded sphere.” Strikingly, Parmenides’ revisionary metaphysics rested in large measure on a shared set of beliefs concerning what one can learn, know, and communicate to others.⁴¹

⁴¹ My thanks to Patricia Curd, Caroline Herman, Adam Johnson and Emese Mogyorodi for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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