

The Non-Divinity of Parmenides' What-is

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ABSTRACT: It is often assumed that Parmenides what-is is, in some sense, divine. This chapter considers the further assumptions that tend to underly such readings. It argues that neither appeals to a broader philosophical tradition nor the possible attribution of intelligence to what-is justify the assumption that what-is is divine. The divinities within Parmenides' poem are anthropomorphic agents and subjects of change. What-is, in excluding change, also excludes divinity. Divinity is not a relevant or necessary property of what-is.

KEY-WORDS: *Alētheia; Anankē; Anaxagoras; Anaximander; Anthropomorphism; Dikē; Doxa; Divinity; Empedocles; God; Moira; Parmenides; Reality; Xenophanes; What-is.*

RESUMO: Muitas vezes aceita-se que, em Parmênides, o-que-é é, em certo sentido, divino. Este capítulo examina as hipóteses adicionais que tendem a dar suporte a tais leituras. Ele argui que nem apelos a uma larga tradição filosófica e nem uma possível atribuição de inteligência ao o-que-é justifica aceitar que o-que-é é divino. As divindades do poema de Parmênides são agentes antropomórficos e sujeitos de mutações. O-que-é, excluindo a mutação, exclui também a divindade. A divindade não é uma propriedade relevante ou necessária do o-que-é.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Alētheia; Anankē; Anaxágoras; Anaximandro; Antropomorfismo; Dikē; Doxa; Divindade; Empédocles; Deus; Moira; Parmênides; Reality; Xenophanes; o-que-é.*

Introduction

The divine is a significant presence in Parmenides' poem. The *proem* (fragment B1) describes Parmenides' journey on "the many-voiced route of the divinity (δαίμων)". He is escorted by the *Heliades*, the Maidens of the Sun (B1.9), who drive the chariot in which he travels. Parmenides describes how, once the *Heliades* have persuaded the goddess *Dikē* (Justice) to unbolt the "gates of the paths of Night and Day" for which she holds the keys, they bring him to an unnamed goddess who "received me kindly, and took my right hand in her hand and spoke these words and addressed me in this way" (B1.22-3). Everything that follows in the poem is presented as the revelation promised by the goddess to her mortal guest, a revelation that he is instructed to "convey" (κόμεισαι) to others once he has heard it (B2.1). From its very outset, then, Parmenides' philosophy is inextricably linked to the authority and activity of the divine.

As this brief description indicates, the opening of Parmenides' poem describes a man, albeit one singled out for his understanding – as the reference to the "man who knows" (εἰδώς φώς) at B1.3 suggests – welcomed into the realm of the gods, "far from the well-trodden path of men" (B1.27). This landscape is populated with several deities, notably all female: the *Heliades*, *Dikē*, and the anonymous goddess in whose voice the rest of the poem is spoken. As has often been recognized, these goddesses and the progress towards enlightenment that they facilitate are described in ways that echo elements of both broader religious practices and the poetic tradition (especially Hesiod and Pindar).¹

The gods have a role to play in the latter part of the poem too, in

¹ See S. Tor *Mortal and Divine in Early Greek Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 250–277 for a thorough study of the literary and religious background of the *proem*.

the cosmology of the *Doxa*. Fragment B12 identifies a “divinity (δαίμων) who steers all things” from her position at the centre of a set of cosmic rings of fire and night. We are told, in particular, that she “rules over the loathsome birth and mingling of all things”, controlling the mingling of the sexes. Fragment B10 describes the activity of *Anankē* (Necessity) in guiding and binding the sky “to hold the limit of the stars”. The only male god to make an appearance in the poem is Eros, whom fragment B13 tells us was “devised first of all the gods (*theoi*)”. In the cosmological fragments, the gods are both creators and creations and are, in the case of the goddess of B12, literally embedded within the physical system. Here we see the likely influence of both traditional poetic creation narratives, such as Hesiod’s *Theogony*, and the philosophical cosmologies of the Milesian natural philosophers. Of course, the status and purpose of the *Doxa* is notoriously difficult to establish, not least because it is introduced by the goddess as “the beliefs of mortals, in which there is no true cogency” (B1.30).²

The role and, indeed, presence of divinities within the difficult but fascinating fragments of the *Alētheia* is harder to establish. In describing the nature of what-is, the goddess makes reference to the controlling presences of *Dikē* (B8.14), *Anankē* (Necessity, B8.30) and *Moirā* (Fate, B8.37). We have already seen that *Dikē* features as a gatekeeping goddess in the *proem* and that *Anankē* has a creative or, at least, guiding role in the creation of the cosmos. These intratextual parallels may therefore indicate the presence of controlling deities in the *Alētheia* as well as the *Doxa*.³ Some, however, have suggested that these names should be read as metaphors or terms of necessity in this context,

² See also B8.50–61.

³ A. P. D. Mourelatos, *The Route of Parmenides* (Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2008) 25–29 treats the *Dikē*, *Anankē*, *Moirā* of the *Alētheia* as alternative faces of the unnamed goddess of the poem.

rather than as deities as such.⁴

The longest surviving fragment of Parmenides' poem, B8, asserts and argues for the necessary qualities of "what is" (τὸ ἓόν) offering "signs" (σήματα) that:

...what-is is ungenerated and indestructible,
Whole, unique,⁵ unmoving and complete.
It never was nor will it be, since it is now all the same,
One, continuous. (B8.3-6)

There is no suggestion here that what-is is a god. In fact, nowhere in the surviving fragments does the goddess explicitly state that what-is is divine, nor does she use any obvious epithet of divinity to describe it.⁶ This has not, however, prevented some readers of Parmenides from antiquity onwards from assuming that Parmenides' what-is is some kind of god. This chapter presents a reconsideration of the question whether what-is is divine. This is a question that is interesting not only for its own sake, but also because of its significance for broader issues in the interpretation of Parmenides, including his epistemology, his relation to the wider philosophical tradition, and the relation between the three parts of the poem and their respective subject-matters.

I will begin by assessing the arguments in favour of reading Parmenides' what-is as divine. As we will see, these arguments tend to rely on questionable appeals to tradition and influence and to take certain conceptual connections for granted. Turning to the evidence of

⁴ See, for example, D. Sedley, "Parmenides and Melissus" in A. A. Long (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 113-33; 118 for the suggestion that the Justice of B8.14 represents "parity of reasoning".

⁵ Preferring the text of B8.4 attested by Simplicius, Clement and Philoponus (‘οὐλον μονογενές’) over that found in Plutarch (ἔστι γὰρ οὐλομελές). See A. H. Coxon, *The Fragments of Parmenides* (Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing 2009) 314.

⁶ See Mourelatos, *Route*, 44 n.108 on this point.

the poem, we will see that the gods as Parmenides represents them are incompatible with the nature of what-is. They are anthropomorphic, numerous, and created. They are also always present as agents or causes of change. This fact, I will argue, indicates that Parmenides regarded the gods as belonging to the world of change excluded from the *Alētheia*. Finally, I will consider the possibility that Parmenides attributed some kind of non-traditional divinity to his what-is, such as seems to be enjoyed by the unchanging god of Xenophanes. I will argue that Parmenides' what-is is incompatible even with this sort of divinity, inextricably linked as it is to god's status as a generative force. Parmenides is interested in the necessary qualities of what-is, and, simply put, there is no necessity for it to be divine. It gains nothing from such a status and, if anything, would be undermined in its fundamental reality if it were required or considered to function as a god.

Appeals to Tradition

I noted above that there is no explicit attribution of divinity to what-is anywhere in the surviving fragments of Parmenides' poem.⁷ Further, when ancient readers of Parmenides do talk about Parmenides on god, they tend to do so with a focus on the deities at work in the cosmology of the *Doxa*.⁸ We do, however, find some suggestions within the doxographical tradition that Parmenides' what-is is a god. Notably, Aëtius asserts that Parmenides declared the "unmoving, limited and

⁷ It is worth admitting the possibility that this lack is partly informed by the relative indifference of the Peripatetics (with whom the doxographical tradition begins) to the role of the divine within the cosmologies of the *physiologoi*. See A. A. Long, 'Parmenides on Thinking Being,' *Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 12 (1996) 125–62. This tradition, however, is unlikely to be culpable for the lack of divine language in B8's description of what-is, given that this section of the poem has been so extensively preserved.

⁸ As in the case of Cicero *De Natura Deorum* 1.11.28. Of course, this phenomenon may also show the influence of the Peripatetic focus on cosmology.

spherical” to be god.⁹ This claim appears in the context of a summary of the gods of philosophers, setting Parmenides within a wider philosophical tradition of assigning divinity to fundamental entities or principles. It is certainly tempting to follow Aëtius in using the broader philosophical tradition to inform our understanding of Parmenides’ conception of what-is. As we shall see, however, such comparisons are rarely straightforward enough to be decisive.

The most obvious difficulty for making an informative comparison between a supposed philosophical tradition and Parmenides is the fact of the latter’s obvious and significant distinctiveness. For while it may well be true that thinkers such as Anaximander and Heraclitus attributed divinity (or at least divine epithets) to the primary stuff of the universe, it is not obvious that we should simply assume that Parmenides followed them in doing so.¹⁰ After all, both Anaximander and Heraclitus were attempting to identify the fundamental cause of the physical world of change, a world apparently excluded from what-is as described in the *Alētheia*. Given that Parmenides’ poem appears to offer, in part, a critique of previous cosmological thinking, we must pause before importing any apparent ‘commonplace’ of such thinking into his metaphysics.

It is Xenophanes who provides the most frequently cited and informative comparison for Parmenides’ what-is. Xenophanes’ account of his one god exerts a clear influence on the goddess’s description of what-is.¹¹ Xenophanes’ god “always remains in the same place, not moving at all” (B26: αἰεὶ δ’ ἐν ταύτῳ μίμνει κινούμενος οὐδέν), since

⁹ Aëtius 1.7.26. See also pseudo-Aristotle *MXG* 987b7–10 and Clement *Strom.* 5.14.112.1.

¹⁰ Aristotle *Physics* 203b14–16 supports the suggestion that Anaximander regarded to apeiron as divine. See G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 117. Heraclitus B30’s reference to “ever-living” (ἀείζωον) fire can be read alongside B64’s assertion that the “thunderbolt that steers all things” as implying the divinity of fire.

¹¹ See J. Bryan, *Likeness and Likelihood in the Presocratics and Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 93–100 for a detailed comparison of the two accounts.

it would not be “appropriate” (ἐπιπρέπει) for him to change location. Similarly, Parmenides’ goddess tells us that what-is “remaining the same and in the same, lies by itself/ and thus stands fast” (B8.29–30: ταῦτόν τ’ ἐν ταῦτῳ τε μένον καθ’ ἑαυτό τε κείται/ χούτως ἔμπεδον αὐθι μένει), circumscribed “because it is not right (θέμις) that Being is incomplete”. We can see further parallels between Xenophanes’ claims that god perceives and thinks as a whole (B24: οὔλος) and the goddess’s description of what-is as “whole” (οὔλον) at B8.4. The status of what-is as “unique” (μονογενές) may well echo Xenophanes’ fragment B23’s reference to ‘one god, greatest among gods and men’ (εἷς θεός, ἐν τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισι μέγιστος).¹² Finally, just as Xenophanes reproaches humans for entertaining the idea of gods being born (B14), so Parmenides’ goddess criticises mortals for conceiving of what-is as coming to be (B8.39). Now, these verbal and conceptual echoes of Xenophanes’ description of god within the *Alētheia* could well be thought to imply that Parmenides also followed his predecessor in attributing divinity to what-is. Here, however, the absence of explicit epithets of the divine is telling. In fact, Parmenides’ avoidance of the language of divinity is all the more notable in the context of an account that provides a clear and careful response to Xenophanes’ description of god. The most obvious implication of this absence is that what-is should *not* be regarded as a god.¹³ Indeed, we should note that, in at least one way, Xenophanes’ god seems to have more in common with the cosmological principles of the Milesians and Heraclitus than with Parmenides’ what-is. For whilst Xenophanes’ god is himself stable and

¹² See note 5 above.

¹³ S. Broadie ‘Rational Theology’ in A. A. Long (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 205–224: 214 suggests that Parmenides withholds the language of divinity to signal the difference between his metaphysical enterprise and the cosmological endeavours of his predecessors.

unchanging, he is a cause of change.¹⁴

If the connection to Xenophanes serves to undermine, rather than bolster, the possibility that Parmenides attributed divinity to what-is, perhaps Melissus can be thought to provide some support. In fragment B7, Melissus argues that what-is cannot suffer pain or grief “for it would not be whole if it were in pain, for a thing that is in pain cannot exist always”. Although Melissus, like Parmenides, does not explicitly state that reality is a god, this denial of mental and physical pain has been read by some as indicating that it is “being assimilated to a deity”, with the implication that such assimilation should be extended to Parmenides’ what-is.¹⁵ Now, Melissus’ reality is certainly closer in kind and purpose to Parmenides’ what-is than the cosmological principles of the Ionians or even Xenophanes’ god, but this is not to say that there are no differences between them. Most notably, Melissus’ reality is ‘unlimited’, in contrast to Parmenides’ limited what-is.¹⁶ Such a significant difference between Parmenides and Melissus suggests that, even if we accept that Melissus regards his reality as a god, this need not in itself imply the divinity of what-is for Parmenides. In addition, even if Melissus’ denial of pain indicates an assimilation to god, the question remains whether assimilation should be understood as identification. Readers such as Aëtius have felt that it should.¹⁷ It is, however, conceivable that Melissus adopts the language of divinity without necessarily implying that reality

¹⁴ As indicated by Xenophanes fragment B25: “but completely without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind”. See also B38. J. Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 329 provides an emphatic rejection of the idea that parallels with Xenophanes should be taken to imply the divinity of Parmenides’ what-is.

¹⁵ D. Sedley, ‘Parmenides and Melissus’, in A. A. Long (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 113–133: 128.

¹⁶ Parmenides B8.26–34.

¹⁷ Aëtius 1.7.22.

is itself a god.¹⁸

Like Melissus' reality, Empedocles' *sphairos* seems to respond directly to Parmenides' what-is.¹⁹ Unlike Melissus, Empedocles appears to have offered a clear statement that the *sphairos* is a god.²⁰ Here too, however, we see a significant difference between Empedocles' divine *sphairos* and Parmenides' what-is. In this case, although the sphere is not explicitly a cause of change, it is evidently *subject* to change in a way that Parmenides' what-is is not and cannot be.²¹ Anaxagoras, meanwhile, may co-opt the language of divinity to describe his *nous*, but he too makes no overt claim that it is a god and, as with the principles of the philosophers discussed above, his *nous* differs from what-is significantly in being a source of change, motion and genesis.²² Both Empedocles and Anaxagoras are clearly responding to and influenced by Parmenides.²³ But, insofar as there are significant differences in the role and activity of the *sphairos* and *nous* and those of Parmenides' what-is, these responses give no grounds for the assumption that Parmenides' what-is should itself be considered a deity. In fact, as we shall see in the next section, Anaxagoras' *nous* offers indirect evidence that Parmenides' what-is is not divine.

We have seen that there is no clear support within the poem itself for understanding Parmenides' what-is to be a god. Any appeal to the

¹⁸ Melissus' denial of pain may seem more plausibly to suggest a connection to Xenophanes' god than to traditional deities. See Long, 'Thinking', 141. Long suggests that the "absence of physical and mental pain are defining characteristics of the divine in Greek thought". Note, however, that the Homeric gods can be both annoyed and injured. See, for example, Poseidon's anger at *Odyssey* 1.20 and the wounding of Aphrodite at *Iliad* 5.335-40.

¹⁹ See, for example, B27's reference to a "rounded *sphairos*, exulting in its joyful solitude", which echoes Parmenides B8.29 and 8.43.

²⁰ See Empedocles fragment B31 in context in Simplicius *Phys.* 1184, 2.

²¹ B31 describes the successive "shaking" (πελεμίζετο) of the "limbs" (γυῖα) of the *sphairos*.

²² Anaxagoras B12 describes *nous* as, among other things, all-knowing, most powerful, and controlling all things.

²³ Note that B12 describes *nous* as "alone" (μόνος) and "all alike" (πᾶς ὅμοιος).

broader philosophical tradition of attributing divinity to fundamental principles and stuffs assumes a continuity between Parmenides and the cosmologies he criticises. Such an assumption must, in turn, overlook the key difference between Parmenides and these *physiologoi*, which is that he stands apart (in the *Alētheia*, at least) from their attempts to explain and describe change. Anaximander's *apeiron*, Anaxagoras' *nous*, and even Xenophanes' god are all offered as the explanation of natural change.²⁴ Insofar as such change is excluded from Parmenides' *Alētheia*, those seeking to appeal to this tradition to enhance our understanding of what-is must provide some reason to set this fundamental difference aside.

Some may suggest that Aëtius' *testimonium*, cited above, provides precisely such evidence. After all, all things being equal, one should generally prefer an interpretation of Parmenides that fits the doxographical account. In this case, however, all things are not equal. I will argue below that Parmenides rejects the classification of what-is as divine, since, on his account, gods belong to the realm of change. Before I turn to what the text has to say about the nature of the gods, it is worth taking the time to consider the significance of the divinity, or otherwise, of what-is. As we shall see, even here there are assumptions in the scholarship that can and should be resisted.

Divine Mind

It is notable that assertions of the divinity of what-is tend to be made by readers grappling with the difficulties of understanding the relation between what-is and *nous*. Those who want to argue that the notoriously difficult fragment B3 represents a claim of identity for mind and what-is often do so via an appeal to the broader tradition considered

²⁴ As Tor, *Mortal*, 315 notes, the traditional, directive power of the divine is attributed to the goddess who "steers all things" in the cosmology of the *Doxa*.

above. When we consider the tendency of other thinkers to attribute divinity, intelligence and vitality to their fundamental principles, it is suggested, we will appreciate the likelihood that Parmenides did so too.²⁵ We have seen that such appeals to tradition and the assumptions of continuity on which they depend are far from straightforward. Of course, if Parmenides' what-is could be established to be a deity along the lines of Xenophanes' god, that would certainly bolster the case for its possession of, or identity with, mind. As we have seen, however, there is no explicit claim in the poem that what-is is a god, and nor are traditional epithets of divinity used to describe it. In fact, scholars are generally more interested in the question of whether what-is has mind, rather than with its divinity *per se*. Divinity is often assumed to accompany intelligence within Greek thought on underlying principles: if it is or has mind, then it is a god.²⁶ It is therefore worth considering whether the attribution of mind or vitality to what-is necessarily implies that it is also divine.²⁷

On this point, we can return to the example of Anaxagoras' *nous*. As noted above, Anaxagoras does use language traditionally associated with the divine when describing *nous*. In fragment B12, he tells us that it has complete knowledge and control over all living things. But Anaxagoras nowhere goes so far as to explicitly call *nous* a god, even in the course of presenting a thorough account of its nature.²⁸ As with Parmenides, we find *testimonia* suggesting that Anaxagoras did regard

²⁵ See, for example, Long, 'Thinking', 140; Sedley, 'Parmenides', 120; Coxon, *Fragments*, 297.

²⁶ See, for example, Tor, *Mortal*, 315-16 for a hint of such a view.

²⁷ Note that the question is not whether what-is has mind, which is a notoriously difficult question, but simply whether mind implies divinity.

²⁸ D. Sedley, *Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of Californian Press, 2007) 25 suggests that the language of B12 implies that, rather than identifying *nous* as a god, Anaxagoras is "replacing the traditional notion of a supreme divinity with a fundamentally naturalistic concept".

nous as a god.²⁹ But, of course, we also find ancient accounts of Anaxagoras' perceived impiety that make no mention of any relevant commitment to the divinity of *nous*.³⁰ Whether or not Anaxagoras himself conceived of *nous* as divine (and I am inclined to think that the lack of any claim of its divinity in B12 suggests that he did not), it seems that at least some of his ancient audience assumed that cosmic intellect did not necessarily equate to god. If we accept the possibility that Anaxagoras could posit (or be seen to posit) *nous* as a controlling force without also making it divine, we will need to reconsider the assumption that for Parmenides' what-is to be or to have mind must also imply that it is a god.

If the identification of mind and what-is does not necessitate its divinity, what of the attribution of vitality? At B1.28-30, the goddess sets out her agenda for the revelation:

...And it is right that you should learn all things,
Both the unmoving heart of persuasive truth (ἡμὲν Ἀληθείης
εὐπειθέος ἀτρεμεῖς ἦτορ),
And the beliefs of mortals, in which there is no true cogency.

The goddess' reference to the unmoving 'heart' (ἦτορ) of truth has been identified as evidence that what-is – for which 'truth' is taken to be a synonym – is in some sense living.³¹ In Homer, ἦτορ is used to refer to the internal source of life, emotion or thought of either gods or mortals.³² In using such a term to describe the subject-matter of the *Alētheia*, Parmenides therefore seems to be granting what-is some kind

²⁹ Aëtius 1. 7. 5 (which refers to the *nous* of god) and 1. 7. 15.

³⁰ Diogenes Laertius 2. 12. It is notable that, in critiquing Anaxagoras' *nous* at *Phaedo* 97b-99d, Socrates makes no suggestion that it is treated as a god.

³¹ See Coxon, *Fragments*, 283; Tor, *Mortal*, 307-8.

³² As at *Iliad* 1.188-192, which describes how Achilles' ἦτορ is divided as to whether he should kill Agamemnon or calm himself.

of vitality. What could what-is be, such that it has (or is) a heart?³³ It is certainly not a mortal, since we will be told that it admits of no genesis or destruction, so must we understand that it is god? Perhaps, in fact, we can understand the attribution of a 'heart' to what-is as equivalent to the attribution of mind. After all, ἦτορ does seem sometimes to function with the sense of 'mind'.³⁴ If it implies not so much the vitality as the intellect or consciousness of what-is, then we can once again align it with Anaxagoras' *nous*, as something which possesses or is mind without necessarily also being divine.

This question of whether divinity is a necessary or even relevant property of what-is is one to which we will return below. I will argue that there is good reason to think that Parmenides' considers divinity to be irrelevant to or incompatible with what-is. First, however, we should turn to what Parmenides' poem does have to say about divinity. As we will see, the gods of Parmenides' poem are consistently represented as inhabiting the realm of change and multiplicity rejected by the *Alētheia*.

Parmenidean Deities

Up to this point, I have been discussing what Parmenides does not say and what can be established about the divinity of what-is in the absence of any explicit claim that it is a god. When we turn to what the poem does say about the gods, we can see that they are represented in a relatively traditional way. Below I will discuss the degree to which this representation should inform our understanding of what-is. For now, it is worth taking the time to establish some of the key characteristics of the Parmenidean pantheon.

The first characteristic to note is that these gods – in fact, mainly

³³ See Tor, *Mortal*, 300-1 for the suggestion ἀληθείης at B1.29 should be understood as a genitive of material or contents rather than a possessive genitive, so that "the unshaken heart comprises the [...] reality".

³⁴ See Long, 'Thinking', 142-3.

goddesses – are represented as emphatically anthropomorphic. This is true of both the deities of the *Doxa* and those of the *proem*. Note, for example, that the controlling goddess of B12, seated in the midst of the rings of fire and night, is said to act as a cosmic helmswoman: she “steers all things” (πάντα κυβερνᾷ).³⁵ This is a deity who has a physical location in the cosmos and whose creative activity is described in terms of human activity. It is, I think, also significant that, like the deities of the *proem*, she is explicitly female. Within this cosmology and the *proem*, gods have a sex. In addition, fragment B13 suggests that some gods at least are created, insofar as it tells us that Eros was the first of the gods to have been “devised” (μητίσαστο).

The anthropomorphism of Parmenides' gods is even clearer in the *proem*. I noted above that the journey of the *proem* is clearly responding to and influenced by traditional religion and authoritative poetry. Just as the goddess of the *Doxa* is given a specific location, so the *proem* describes a divine landscape within which individual deities are positioned. The unnamed revelatory goddess waits for Parmenides at the end of his journey along the “track” (ἄμοξιτός) (B1.21) that is the “route of the divinity” (B1.2-3). To reach her, he must pass through the “gates of the roads of Night and Day” before which *Dikē* stands as gatekeeper. The *Heliades* who accompany him on his journey are described as driving the chariot in which he travels (B1.21), having left the “House of Night” (B1.9). In the *Heliades'* status as charioteers, we see a parallel to the anthropomorphism of the *Doxa's* helmsman of the cosmos.³⁶

In addition to their physical location and activity, the *proem's* female divinities are described both as possessing bodies and as wearing clothes. We are told that the *Heliades* were hurrying to escort Parmenides “having pushed back with their hands (χερσί) the veils

³⁵ See Coxon, *Fragments*, 371 on the philosophical and poetic resonances of this description.

³⁶ And, perhaps, to that of *Dikē's* active role as gatekeeper.

(καλύπτρας) from their heads (κράτων)” (B1.10). At B1.24–25, Parmenides describes his eventual meeting with the goddess herself:

And the goddess received me graciously, and took my right hand with her hand (χεῖρα δὲ χειρὶ/ δεξιτερὴν ἔλεν),
And spoke these words (ἔπος φάτο) and addressed me in this way (με προσήυδα).

Note that the goddess is not simply described as having hands and a voice. We are told that she makes physical contact with Parmenides, taking his mortal hand in her immortal equivalent, and that she addresses him directly. On the evidence of the *proem* and the *Doxa*, Parmenides seems to be precisely the kind of person that Xenophanes targets for their beliefs about the anthropomorphism of the gods:

But mortals think that the gods come to be
And have their clothes and voice and body.³⁷

We have seen that the deities in Parmenides' poem do, indeed, come to be, and to have clothes and voices and bodies like humans. Indeed, it seems reasonable that they should do so. In the case of the gods of the *Doxa*, Parmenides' is apparently offering a critical representation of the way that mortals tend to explain the world around them which, as we have seen, is often in terms of some kind of divine agency. It is here that the parallel between the broader *peri physeōs* tradition and Parmenides' poem, so often claimed as informative of the nature of what-is, can prove illuminating.

In the case of the *proem*, meanwhile, Parmenides is in part motivated by a desire to establish the epistemic potential of those who follow the reasoning of the *Alētheia's* arguments. Xenophanes had insisted on the absolute cognitive and physical difference between god and humans, claiming that his one god is “not at all the same as mortals

³⁷ Xenophanes B14.

in body or in thought”.³⁸ Parmenides, in direct and deliberate contrast, holds out the possibility that, if we think the right way about the right object, we can move beyond the confused mortal thinking of the majority and access the kind of understanding that is traditionally (and essentially, in the case of Xenophanes) reserved for god.³⁹ In a way, the goddess of the *Proem* serves as an epistemic paradigm for us. In coming to understand what is, we aspire to the understanding that she possesses. We aim to “become like god”, as the later tradition will have it. Insofar as the goddess serves as a paradigm for us, it makes sense that she is represented as similar to us. In insisting on the epistemic and communicative distance between gods and mortals, Xenophanes had also insisted on an essential physical and cognitive difference between them. We could not emulate Xenophanes’ one god even if we tried. In seeking to collapse that epistemic gap and to hold out the possibility that thinking in the right way can bring understanding such as the gods possess, Parmenides emphatically reinstates anthropomorphic gods (and revelation) at the very outset of his poem.

We have seen that, within his anthropomorphic account, Parmenides attributes certain activities to his gods: helmsman, charioteer, and gatekeeper.⁴⁰ We have also seen that Eros appears to have a genesis within the cosmology. Both these observations relate to the second key aspect of Parmenides’ representation of the gods. In both the *proem* and the *Doxa*, deities function as agents – and sometimes subjects – of change and generation.

We noted above that the goddess of B12 has a physical location within the rings of fire and night from which she steers the cosmos. B12 goes on to explain the nature of her creative control:

³⁸ Xenophanes B23.

³⁹ See Bryan, *Likeness*, 100–4 on Parmenides’ response to Xenophanes’ epistemology. Tor, *Mortal*, 250–277 offers a detailed discussion of the nature of the epistemic transformation described by the proem.

⁴⁰ See also perhaps B10’s description of the activity of *Anankē* in binding the sky.

For she rules over the loathsome birth and mingling of all things,
 Sending female to mingle with male, and in turn conversely
 Male with female...

The goddess is said to “steer all things” via her particular control over *mixis* and generation, ruling over the ‘loathsome birth of all things (πάντων)’. She thus exercises cosmic control by initiating precisely the kind of generative process excluded from what-is in the arguments of B8.⁴¹

We see other kinds of change brought about by the deities of Parmenides’ *proem*. The *Heliades* not only change location themselves (*contra* Xenophanes’ claim that it is not fitting for god to move), but also transport Parmenides to the goddess. In order to facilitate that journey, they effect a change in the gatekeeper *Dikē*, persuading her to bring about a further alteration in turn, by unlocking the gates. Finally, we see that the revelatory goddess herself seeks to produce a cognitive change in Parmenides, by aiding him in understanding the true nature of reality.⁴² In each case, and as in the *Doxa*, we see gods who act as agents of change or, in Aristotelian terms, efficient causes.⁴³

In addition to effecting change and genesis, we see that these deities are also the *subject* of processes of change: Eros is “devised”; the *Heliades* move from one place to another as they escort Parmenides on his journey; *Dikē* is persuaded to unlock the doors. These gods can both change and be changed.

In surveying the broader cosmological tradition, we saw that

⁴¹ See B8.6–20 for the exclusion of coming-to-be from what-is.

⁴² Insofar as the journey of the *proem* can be read as a metaphor for epistemic progress, we may read the *Heliades* as effecting a similar or related change in Parmenides’ understanding.

⁴³ See J. Bryan, ‘Reconsidering the Authority of Parmenides’ *Doxa*’ in J. Bryan, R. Wardy and J. Warren (eds.), *Authors and Authorities in Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 20–40: 31–2 for the suggestion that the presence of the goddess as an agent indicates Parmenides’ critique of the explanatory sufficiency of physical principles alone.

those who assign intelligence and/or divinity to their fundamental stuffs or principles do so within the context of explaining genesis or natural change. This is the case even for Xenophanes' unmoving god. Here, I think, we have an explanation as to why Parmenides might want to avoid assigning divinity to what-is. To do so would be to imply that it too is either subject to or the cause of change or genesis. As Parmenides' poem represents gods and other deities, they are plural and dynamic efficient causes, subject to generation and corporal differentiation. As such, they belong to the world of plurality and change described by the *Doxa*. I would even go so far as to suggest that the possession of immortality is, in itself, a reason to consign its bearer to the world of the *Doxa*. For, if we consider immortality and mortality to be a case of the kind of "opposites in body" erroneously constructed by mortal thinking and condemned by the goddess at B8.53–6, then the act of qualifying something as immortal presumably imports as much illicit "what-is-not" as the application of any other term of opposition.⁴⁴

At this point, it is worth considering a potential objection to my claim that Parmenides consistently represents the gods as effecting and undergoing change, and therefore as belonging to the world of the *Doxa*. After all, it may seem obvious that the divinities within the cosmology of the *Doxa*, at least, must be described in cosmological and generational terms. And insofar as the *Doxa* is introduced as untrustworthy (B8.50), this need not be taken to imply anything about the gods in reality. And, in fact, turning to the *Alētheia*, we can identify the possible presence of deities who are explicitly not causes or subjects of change. Rather, *Dikē*, *Anankē* and *Moirā* each appear to function in the description of what-is as maintaining stability and changelessness.

Dikē is referred to at B8.13–15 as a restriction preventing the

⁴⁴ What-is is described as "indestructible" at B8.2, but never as "immortal" (ἀθάνατος or similar). Insofar as the deities of the *proem* are explicitly female, they also import the what-is-notness of the opposites male and female. Note that τὸ ἕόν is neuter. See G. Journée, 'Lumière et Nuit, Féminin et Masculin chez Parménide d'Elée: quelques remarques', *Phronesis* 57 (2012) 289–318 on the significance of sexual differentiation in Parmenides.

genesis and destruction of what-is:

...for the sake of which neither coming-to-be
Nor passing away has Justice allowed by loosening her shackles,
But she keeps it.

There are echoes here of *Dikē*'s role as gatekeeper in the *Proem*. There, *Dikē* acts as a potential barrier to Parmenides' progress, unlocking the gates after the persuasive intervention of the *Heliades*. Here *Dikē* has not unlocked her shackles. She cannot, for to do so would be to allow impossible generation and destruction. Despite this difference, the similarity of the two in acting as a restriction is clear. Bearing this similarity in purpose in mind, should we read the *Dikē* of the *Alētheia* as the same goddess we have seen personified as the holder of the "keys of retribution" and subject to persuasion in the *proem*? The question is decided by the unpalatable consequences of reading this *Dikē* as an agent identical to the gatekeeper of the *proem*. For if we conceive of *Dikē* at B8.13-5 as a differentiated agent, separate from and acting upon what-is from the outside, Parmenides' account of the nature of what-is will be immediately undermined. On such a reading, *Dikē* would be something other than what-is which itself has being. She could therefore function as precisely the kind of efficient cause of generation and destruction that Parmenides wants to exclude.⁴⁵ It is for this reason that some have preferred to read the reference to *Dikē* in fragment B8 as part of what Coxon calls "an extended judicial metaphor expressive of logical necessity".⁴⁶

A comparison between the *Anankē* of the *Doxa* and that of the *Alētheia* serves to reiterate this point. In the cosmology of the *Doxa*,

⁴⁵ If Aëtius (2.7.1.12-16) is correct in suggesting an identification between the directing goddess of the *Doxa* and the deities of the *proem*, we have even further reason to reject the idea that such an anthropomorphic goddess could also be active in the *Alētheia*.

⁴⁶ Coxon, *Fragments*, 320. See also Sedley, *Parmenides*, 118.

Anankē acts as both a guiding and a controlling force, setting 'limits' on the heavens:

...and you shall also know the surrounding heaven,
Whence it grew and how Necessity guided and shackled it
(ἄγουσ(α) ἔπέδησεν Ἀνάγκη)
To hold the limits of the stars.⁴⁷

Here, *Anankē* acts upon the generated heaven by guiding its progress and imposing a limit upon it. Within the *Alētheia*, in contrast, *Anankē* does not actively *impose* any limit on what-is, rather it *maintains* a limit:

...it lies by itself
And thus stands fast; for powerful Necessity (κρατερὴ γὰρ Ἀνάγκη)
Holds it in bonds of limit (πέιρατος ἐν δεσμοῖσιν ἔχει),
circumscribing it.⁴⁸

As with *Dikē* in the *Alētheia*, *Anankē* here cannot be something over and above what-is without undermining the arguments by which its nature is established, in particular the argument against *ex nihilo* creation. Rather, the dynamic, guiding and limiting agency of the *Doxa* is replaced by a metaphor for the logical or ontological necessity that determines the stability of what-is.⁴⁹

One might worry that the goddess leads us astray in giving the names of divinities to the functioning of logical or ontological necessity on what-is, all the more so since these divinities feature as such elsewhere in the poem. In response to such a worry, one could appeal to

⁴⁷ B10. 5-7.

⁴⁸ B8. 29-31.

⁴⁹ The reference at B8. 37-8 to *Moirā* (Fate) having "shackled" (ἔπέδησεν) what-is could be taken to align with the activity of *Anankē* in B10, except that it is presented as explanatory of the fact that there is nothing other than what-is. For this reason, it too is best treated as a metaphor of logical or ontological necessity, rather than as describing the activity of a deity external to what-is.

the fact that these terms need not always carry divine connotations. In fact, however, we should regard these verbal echoes across the different sections of the poem as deliberate and provocative. It is in comparing the two descriptions of *Dikē* in the *proem* and the *Alētheia*, and the two references to *Anankē* in the *Alētheia* and the *Doxa* that we appreciate the differences between them, and thus between the different worlds that they describe.⁵⁰ The world of the *Alētheia* is one in which the nature of what-is can be understood in terms of logical or ontological necessity. The worlds of the *proem* and the *Doxa* are worlds of change and plurality in which anthropomorphic gods act as both agents and objects of change. Such gods are necessarily excluded from the *Alētheia*.

The Purpose of Gods

I have argued that divinity as it is represented in Parmenides' poem is incompatible with what-is. Parmenides' gods are emphatically anthropomorphic, with bodies and voices like those of mortals. The divine realm of the *proem*, like the cosmos described by the *Doxa*, is a realm of multiplicity, change and motion. This is the 'natural habitat' of Parmenidean deities.

Even if we accept that *this* mode of divinity is incompatible with what-is, however, we may still want to consider the possibility that Parmenides regarded it as some rather different kind of god. After all, we have seen that Xenophanes' account of his one god had a significant influence on Parmenides' description of what-is. And Xenophanes, in rejecting the anthropomorphic gods of Homer and Hesiod, does not give up on god altogether. Rather he reasons that god must be unmoving, undisturbed, all-knowing and one, entirely different from mortals. Perhaps Parmenides' what-is, which resembles Xenophanes'

⁵⁰ See J. Mansfeld, *Die Offenbarung des Parmenides und die menschliche Welt* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1964) 122-221 and Mourelatos, *Route*, 247-53 on the possible significance of these verbal similarities.

god in so many ways, could also be a non-anthropomorphic, non-traditional god.⁵¹ Is there any good reason to decide against such a possibility, beyond the fact that the goddess does not call what-is divine? In fact, I think this may be the wrong question to ask. Rather we should ask if there is any good reason to assume that it is a god. The answer depends on what we think would be gained by attributing divinity to what-is. This not so much a matter of whether what-is *could* be a god, but rather of whether it *needs to be a god*. As I noted above, Xenophanes' god is similar to Parmenides' what-is in many ways, but the most significant difference between the two is that Xenophanes' god acts as an efficient cause. Since Parmenides' what-is is not and cannot act in any way, let alone to effect or admit any kind of change, it is hard to see what would be gained by granting it divine agency.

In a sense then, we can regard the attribution of divinity to what-is as unnecessary, insofar as it would serve no real purpose.⁵² It might even be misleading, if I am right that Parmenides would regard any attribution of divinity to what-is as erroneously implying that it has agency of some sort. In addition, we should note that divinity is not necessary in a stricter sense. Fragment B8 lists the necessary properties of what-is. It *must* be ungenerated, stable, complete, whole and unique. There is no good reason to think that it *must* be divine. In fact, as I have suggested, there are good reasons to think that it is not. Unless we can find a reason to regard divinity as a *necessary* property of what-is, as opposed to a possible one, we should resist the urge to assume it. Certainly, such a reason is unlikely to be found in an appeal to tradition, especially when dealing with a thinker as difficult and original as Parmenides.

There is one further question to be addressed here. For if I am

⁵¹ See Tor, *Mortal*, 315–16 for this suggestion.

⁵² Mourelatos, *Route*, 44 n. 108 suggests that the language (particularly of bondage) used to describe what-is seems more likely to elicit compassion than reverence.

right that Parmenides regards gods as essentially belonging to the realm of multiplicity and change described by the *Doxa*, what are we to make of the fact that it is one of these gods who reveals both the nature of what-is and the deficiencies of the *Doxa*? Is the goddess describing her own impossibility? There are two things to consider here. The first is that we already know that Parmenides does not regard the deficiencies of the *Doxa* as a reason not to discuss or describe it. That troublesome fact has generated all kinds of puzzlement about the purpose of the latter part of the poem. The second brings us back to the discussion of anthropomorphism above. Parmenides thinks that we have the capacity to exceed the cognitive limits that we impose upon ourselves by thinking, as mortals tend to do, in the wrong way about the wrong kind of thing. He wants to demonstrate that it is possible for us to achieve the kind of knowledge traditionally assigned to the gods (and strictly denied to mortals by Xenophanes). The revelatory goddess who welcomes and instructs Parmenides represents this epistemic potential, as does the journey onto and along the 'route of the goddess' described in the *proem*. The encouragement that the goddess offers and the example that she sets are both dependent on her qualified similarity to us. She needs to be able to communicate with us in order to instruct us. Further, we need to believe that we can think like god if we are to aspire to emulate divine understanding. This is the purpose of the anthropomorphic goddess of the *proem* – to serve as a relevant paradigm of epistemic success. It is worth noting that the status of Parmenides' divinities as efficient causes is relevant to this purpose too. The goddess seeks to effect an epistemic change in bringing us to understand the truth of her account. As such, she aspires to be an agent of change.

Conclusion

I have argued that Parmenides' what-is is not a god. Parmenides' anthropomorphic gods effect change and are themselves sometimes

changed.⁵³ As such, they belong the world of the *Doxa* and are necessarily excluded from the *Alētheia*. Despite their exclusion from the *Alētheia*, Parmenides' gods have an important role to play in his poem. In the case of the goddess of the *proem*, she acts as a paradigm of epistemic success, a purpose to which her anthropomorphism is of value. In the case of the *Doxa*, the gods represent the confused, cosmological thinking of mortals who have yet to understand. In fact, if we want to assert or appeal to a continuity between the divine and intelligent principles of the *physiologoi* and Parmenides' thought, we must look to the goddess of B12 who steers all things, rather than to what-is, which neither causes nor admits of any change. It may well be that Parmenides' what-is can and should be regarded as intelligent but this is not sufficient reason to assume that it is also a god. Divinity is neither a relevant nor a necessary property of what-is.

⁵³ We might find a parallel for these 'gods in the world of change' in the "lesser gods" of Plato's *Timaeus* (see 39e-47e) who exist within the created cosmological system.

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