

The Eleatics and the Projects of Ontology

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ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT: Parmenides provides the earliest surviving Greek example of a thematic reflection on *to eon*, being or what-is; and on *mē eon*, not-being or what-is-not. His work was crucial to the framing of ontological questions and statements in later work. Zeno and Melissus made what-is or being (*to on* or *to eon*) a central focus and engaged directly with Parmenides' reasoning and concerns.

Within philosophy, the term 'ontology' may signify a study of the nature of being, or of what it is to be. Another important use of 'ontology' signifies a set of claims about the nature and number of being or what is, a kind of cataloguing. How best can we characterize what the Eleatics' work has to do with ontology? In what if any ways, and in what if any contexts, can Parmenides, Zeno, or Melissus be said to study the nature of being or of what is? In what if any senses can Parmenides, Zeno, or Melissus be said to provide an account of the nature or number of being or of what is? Does any of the three espouse such an account; or do they engage with that kind of account in some other way?

I will argue that we find in the Eleatics three distinct approaches to ontological questions. I will suggest that Parmenides and Zeno, and likely Melissus, investigated the possibility of research into the nature and number of being as a problem; and cautioned against espousing direct unconditional accounts of the nature of what-is

KEYWORDS: Parmenides; Zeno; Melissus; ontology; inference; inquiry; language; not-being; contradiction.

RIASSUNTO: I frammenti di Parmenide offrono i più antichi esemplari di testi greci arrivati sino a noi con una riflessione tematica su *to eon*, essere oppure ciò-che-è, e su *to mē eon*, non essere oppure ciò-che-non-è. La sua opera ebbe un ruolo cruciale nella contestualizzazione di questioni e affermazioni ontologiche nei lavori che l'avrebbero seguito. Zenone e Melisso fanno di ciò-che-è o essere (*to on* o *to eon*) un punto centrale di discussione e si occupano direttamente dei ragionamenti e dei temi di Parmenide.

In filosofia, il termine 'ontologia' può significare lo studio della natura dell'essere o di ciò che l'essere è. Un altro importante uso di 'ontologia' fa riferimento a un insieme di affermazioni sulla natura e sul numero dell'essere o ciò-che-è, formando una specie di catalogo. Come possiamo caratterizzare meglio gli aspetti della produzione eleatica relativa all'ontologia? In quali modi e in quali contesti, se ci sono, si può dire che Parmenide, Zenone e Melisso studiano la natura dell'essere o di ciò-che-è? In che senso, se ce n'è uno, si può dire che Parmenide, Zenone e Melisso offrono un resoconto della natura e del numero dell'essere o di ciò-che-è? C'è qualcuno dei tre che adotta tale resoconto, oppure essi se ne occupano in altro modo? Sosterrò che negli Eleati si trovano tre impostazioni distinte, ma collegate, delle questioni ontologiche. Suggestirò che Parmenide e Zenone, e probabilmente Melisso, indagarono la possibilità di ricerca della natura e del numero dell'essere come un problema, mettendo in guardia contro l'adozione di una esposizione diretta e incondizionata della natura di ciò-che-è.

The fragments of Parmenides provide the earliest surviving Greek example of a thematic reflection on *to eon*, being or what-is. This is also the earliest surviving thematic reflection on *mē eon*, not-being or non-being or what-is-not. On the face of it, then, Parmenides' work seems to have something to do with ontology. Certainly it played a crucial role in the framing of ontological questions and statements in work that would follow. Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Democritus and Leucippus, Gorgias, Zeno, and Melissus all mention and discuss what is or being (*to on* or *to eon*); and to varying extents the surviving work of all of these treats what-is-not or not-being or non-being as well. Zeno and Melissus¹ not only make what-is a central focus but engage directly with Parmenides' reasoning and concerns. Thus it would seem that the work of Zeno and Melissus, and potentially that of Gorgias, also have something to do with ontology.

Not all commentators agree that the Eleatics worked in ontology. Certainly many if not most read Parmenides and Melissus as advancing direct unconditional claims about being or what-is, and some read Zeno this way as well. However, there have long been challenges to this kind of reading. Hermann 2004 and Robbiano 2006, for example, see Parmenides' project as methodological and not mainly ontological. They suggest that Parmenides intended primarily to convey to his readers not a direct account of what is, but rather some instructions and criteria for conducting inquiry and finding *alētheia*. Pseudo-Plutarch (*Strom.* 5, Zeno DK29 A23), Barnes 1982 (Chapter 12), and Palmer 2009 (Chapter 5) hold that Zeno put forth no positive views of his own,

¹ Gorgias also arguably makes what-is and what-is-not a central focus and engages with Parmenides' reasonings and concerns. His absence from consideration here is due not to a dismissal of the importance of his work, but to the complexity added by the questions concerning the spirit and goals of "On What is Not or On Nature."

but only argued against certain positions.² Rossetti 2015 and 2020 argues that the Eleatics engaged in “virtual philosophy” but not in philosophy proper. Then in so far as one means by ‘ontology’ *philosophical* ontology, i.e. ontology as a branch of philosophy, the views of Barnes, Palmer, pseudo-Plutarch, and Rossetti directly or potentially imply that one or more of the Eleatics did not engage in ontology, and/or did not produce a philosophical ontology.

Let us note first of all that the term ‘ontology’ is not ancient. Its first documented occurrence is in Jakob Lorhard’s *Ogdoas scholastica* (1606).³ From the outset it had a variety of senses, references, and scopes, as Devaux and Lamanna (2009) demonstrate. Within the discipline of philosophy today, the term ‘ontology’ is commonly used to refer to at least two different kinds of thing. Most often, it refers to “the science or study of being; that branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature or essence of being or existence.”⁴ That may in turn be understood in a variety of ways depending on one’s philosophical approach and concerns (e.g. Quinean versus Heideggerian). Another important use of ‘ontology’ signifies an account or set of claims about the nature and number of being or what is, a kind of cataloguing.⁵

Therefore let us ask: If the work of Parmenides, Zeno, or Melissus

² See also Sedley 2017 for a discussion of different positions attributed to Zeno.

³ Devaux and Lamanna 2009; Lamanna 2020.

⁴ S.v. “ontology, n.” 1a. OED [*Oxford English Dictionary*] Online. September 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.mutex.gmu.edu/view/Entry/131551?redirectedFrom=ontology> (accessed October 31, 2019); s.v. “ontologie, subst. fém.” 1., Imbs and Quemada TLF [*Trésor de la langue française*] 1971–1994, online at <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/ontologie> (accessed June 23, 2020); s.v. “ontologie,” Rézeau, Quemada, et al. BHVF [*Base historique du vocabulaire français*] 1970, online at <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/bhvf/ontologie>; s.v. “ontologie,” *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*. 9th ed., 1986, online at <https://academie.atilf.fr/9/consulter/ontologie?page=1> (accessed June 24, 2020).

⁵ S.v. the same OED entry, 1b; the same TLF entry, 2.; Examples of this use include M. Furth, “Elements of Eleatic Ontology,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 6.2 (1968): 111–32; H. Diels, *Poetarum philosophorum fragmenta* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1901), 60.

has something to do with ontology, *what* does it have to do with ontology? What contributions does it make to ontology, in any sense of that word? How might we best characterize the ways in which each author's work appears to engage with the concerns of ontology? In this essay I will explore how each of the three contributed to what came to be called ontology by reflecting on the projects and prospects of the study of being or of what-is.

*Discussions of early uses of eon, to eon, to mē eon,
and related forms*

As early as Homer and Hesiod, we find what might be called general references to things that are, or to beings, using plural participles ('*eonta*,' '*essomena*,' etc.) as substantives.⁶ While these early references do not suggest an interest in the study of being as such, they offer some key features that will inform that study. For example *Iliad* 1.70 describes the seer Calchas as one ὃς ἤδη τὰ τ' ἔόντα τὰ τ' ἔσσόμενα πρό τ' ἔόντα, "who knew the things that are (or: the beings), the things that are to be, and the things that were before."⁷ Hesiod uses the same formula at *Theogony* 38. *Eonta*, *essomena*, and the like suggest an idea of the generic or general.⁸ That is, Homer's and Hesiod's uses suggest an idea of a sort of commonality among things that are, or a way of embracing all of them, that cuts across or includes difference, but also transcends or goes

⁶ Perhaps the most important and influential English-language study on this subject is Kahn 2003; see also Kahn 1969 and 1966.

⁷ All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁸ This raises questions as to the sense of Heraclitus B30, which asserts that the *kosmos* was always, is, and will be everliving fire (*pur aeizōon*). Did he mean to apply the Homeric/Hesiodic formula to all that is, or did he see the *kosmos* as only one example of something that is? This, and Heraclitus' uses of *panta* and *pantōn* in B1, B41, and especially B50, makes the Eleatic focus on *eon* even more conspicuous.

beyond it.⁹ The “things that were, things that are, things that will be” formula found in the passages cited also suggests a sense of a whole. What is now is not the whole, because we can distinguish it from what was and from what will be; together (if they can be together) the three would compose a whole.

This raises another point that is relevant at least to Parmenides’ and Melissus’ work, and perhaps less directly to the work of Zeno: as early as Homer there was an association between conveying what is (and in some cases, what was or what will be) and conveying the *alētheia*.¹⁰ As Constantineau 1987, 223 notes, this means saying that which is, *as it is*.¹¹ Therefore it is not surprising that Parmenides would incorporate a discussion of what-is in the goddess’s account of a road of inquiry associated with *alētheia*;¹² or that Melissus would look into whether what people say is *alēthēs*¹³ makes sense as what-is in DK30 B8.

Parmenides, Zeno, and Melissus provide the first surviving examples of a *thematic concern* with things that are, with their being as such. More than this, all three of the Eleatics focus attention on *eon* or *on*, the singular participle that means ‘being’ or ‘what is.’ Parmenides’ fragments show the earliest attested use of these singular forms as

⁹ As Galgano 2017 has argued, ‘not’ (negation) is at least equally transcendent (see Chapters I and V).

¹⁰ Cf. Herodotus 1.97.1, 5.50.6, 5.106.19, etc.

¹¹ See also Detienne 1990, 47 and note 101. On *alētheia*, awareness, and comprehensive accounts, see Krischer 1965, Cole 1983, Germani 1988.

¹² Thus the goddess’s remark at B8.5 that on the road of inquiry she associates with *alētheia*, there is no “was” or “will be” (or, that what-is neither was nor will be) may be seen as a challenge to Homer’s and Hesiod’s formula.

¹³ The relationship between *alētheia* and *alēthēs* is not the same as that between English ‘truth’ and ‘true,’ French ‘vérité’ and ‘vrai,’ etc. But both *alētheia* and *alēthēs* were supposed to signify that something is, or is real; and at the same time the awareness of what is or is real. Cf. also Melissus’ *eontos alēthinou* in B8, which seems to mean something like ‘what really is.’ As Germani 1988 (180–181, 186n30, 188) and Cole 1983 (21–22, 27–28) have noted, both *alētheia* and *alēthēs* have to do with an accurate, honest, and complete account of what is real; but there may be some difference between them in terms of the aspect emphasized: especially after Parmenides’ time, *alēthēs* may emphasize the realities conveyed rather than the account of them.

substantives marked by the definite article *to*.¹⁴ We find other instances of these singular forms later in the fifth century, including some with *to*: forms of *to eon* and *mē eon* are also in Herodotus; *to on* is also in Thucydides, Leucippus, and Empedocles, the last two in contexts clearly responding at least to Parmenides and perhaps to Zeno or Melissus. Not all of these suggest a thematic concern with what is in so far as it is, or with the claim that anything is (or is not) at all. Only those in Parmenides, Melissus, Leucippus, and Empedocles do. That is, only in the Eleatics and their respondents do we find this thematic concern.¹⁵

It bears noting that the use of the participle with the definite article (*to on*, *to eon*) can be either particular or generic. The particular use specifies a particular thing or being, something that one definitely identifies as being. A parallel would be using *ho legōn*, ‘he who speaks,’ ‘the speaker,’ to refer to a particular speaker (“Alcibiades was the speaker at that event”). The generic use of *to on* or *to eon* refers to a being in general. A parallel would be “At this forum, the speaker is allotted 30 minutes,” a general statement about forum arrangements that can be made and is meaningful even if no one is selected to speak. The negation of the generic use takes *mē*, so that *to mē on* signifies anyone or anything that is not (whether or not anything actually is not).¹⁶

This generic use of the participle offers several expressive possibilities that are important in the work of the Eleatics. First, the generic participle offers a way of speaking about being or beings in

¹⁴ Result of search in *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* for forms of *to on*, *to eon*, *to mē on*, *to mē eon* from Homer through the fifth century. *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*® Digital Library, ed. Maria C. Pantelia. University of California, Irvine. <http://www.tlg.uci.edu> (accessed January 8, 2020).

¹⁵ *Mē eon/mē on* and *mē eonta/mē onta* appear in Herodotus, Gorgias, and Antiphon the sophist as well as Parmenides and Melissus. Here too the uses that reflect a concern about what is as such, or with not-being as such, appear only in Parmenides, Melissus, Gorgias, and Antiphon the sophist (late fifth century). Antiphon appears familiar with on-going debates as to what is and the *alēthēs*, and a work called *Peri tēs alētheias* is attributed to him, so he may well have been responding to the Eleatics.

¹⁶ Smyth 1956, 456, §2052.

general, as contrasted with any particular kind of being, or any particular collection of beings (e.g. members of the cosmos). Second, it enables a focus on the fact that these beings *are*. It considers them in so far as they are, and so enables us to ask what we mean and imply by saying that something is. (Similarly, the generic *mē eon* or *mē on* allows us to ask what might not be, and what not-being means.) Third, as we will see below, the generic participle provides a way of presenting conditional relationships.

*Contexts of discussions of eon etc. in the Eleatics,
as far as we can tell*

To say that Parmenides, Zeno, and Melissus discussed what-is in a thematic way, and to identify from what they might have distinguished what-is, is not sufficient to understand the relationships between their undertakings and ontology. We need also consider how these discussions were framed within their respective works. The kinds of framing to which I will draw attention are Parmenides' goddess's presentation of arguments about *eon* as part of a discussion of roads of inquiry; the uses of inferences and apparent hypotheticals in all three but especially Zeno and Melissus; and the use of verbs of saying in all three.

Parmenides

In the extant fragments of Parmenides, with one possible exception the goddess's remarks pertaining to the features of what-is appear within her discussions of roads of inquiry (B2, B6, B7, B8.1-49). The possible exception is B4. However, in B4 the goddess uses the imperative *leusse* ('look/gaze upon'), and her other uses of imperatives and commands all enjoin or command either that the human stay away from a particular way of conceiving or acting (staying off of a particular

road) or that he do something in following or preparing to follow the road she recommends.¹⁷ In every other case where she uses an imperative, then, the focus is an activity and a way of thinking or conceiving, and thus of being on a road of inquiry or preparing to follow one. In this case, the goddess is telling her visitor to look with *noos* upon what-is in a manner that fits with the way what-is is to be conceived or thought of on the road she recommends in B8.22-25. These things together suggest that B4 also concerns how one is to conceive of what-is in order to follow that road. Nothing in B4 suggests that it is not meant to apply to a road of inquiry. However, what I will say here will not depend on which way it is meant.

One aspect of the framing of remarks about *to eon* in the extant fragments of Parmenides, then, is that they all seem to be part of a speech made by the unnamed goddess character. Another aspect is that she presents these remarks as part of a discussion of roads of inquiry, *hodoi dizēsios*¹⁸. In particular, the remarks about how *eon* is pertain to how it is on the road of inquiry that she recommends. The characteristics she ascribes to *eon* on this road are outlined with a list of *sēmata* on the road, markers or guideposts, at B8.1-6.

This is consonant, I think, with the fact that the goddess frequently speaks not directly about how what-is is, but about how one is to speak (*legein, phasthai*) and conceive of (or intend or apprehend: *noein*) it; or how it is appropriate to speak and conceive of it.¹⁹ That is, a road of inquiry would seem to involve steps for asking about or looking into or looking for something. In order to ask about or look into or look for something, one needs to be able to identify it in a repeatable way, as

¹⁷ I owe this point to Nicola Galgano. Other examples of explicit imperatives and commands include B2.1, B2.6, B6.2, B7.2-6, B8.7-8, B8.51-52.

¹⁸ The phrase appears at B2.2, B6.3, and B7.2.

¹⁹ B2.2, B6.1, B7.2, B8.8, B8.17; possibly also B8.34-36. 'Appropriate': *chrē* B6.1; *chrēōn* B2.5, B8.11, B8.54; *chreos* B8.9; *chreon* B8.45. The goddess presents the opinions of mortals as diverging from this precisely in the ways in which mortals identify (*onomazein*), speak, and conceive of things, as e.g. B8.38-39, B8.53, B9.1, etc.

through a language; and to be able to distinguish the object of inquiry from other things. That means that inquiring involves speaking and conceiving of what-is in a certain way. One might not need to speak and conceive of what-is in that way, or at least not in such a stringent manner, for purposes other than inquiry.

It is possible that Parmenides means the goddess to be saying that we need to speak and conceive of what-is in a certain way in order to have inquiry *because that is the way what-is really is, unconditionally and across all contexts*. But that is not necessarily his meaning, and I think that other features of Parmenides' fragments challenge that interpretation. (If these features are evidence of inconsistency and not deliberate challenge, then we might say that Parmenides offers an inadvertent but real challenge to the claim that the goddess articulates a direct unconditional claim about the way what-is is.)

What other possibilities are there, besides the one in which Parmenides has the goddess offer a direct and unconditional account of the way what-is is when she discusses the road of inquiry she recommends, a direct and unconditional account — “an ontology” — that Parmenides endorses as adequate?

One possibility is that Parmenides was drawing our attention to the kind of conception that seemed to be needed in order for inquiry to proceed, without claiming that that conception was adequate or accurate as an account of what-is. Why might he hesitate to make such a claim? He might hesitate because he wished to remind his audience that the inquiry was not complete and he wanted to allow for the potentiality that the inquiry might turn up contradictions or gaps. Some of these might even necessitate rethinking the starting conceptions. And in any case there might be no guarantee that what-is would be entirely accessible to human apprehension or reasoning. Here one might

compare Xenophanes DK21 B34 and B35,²⁰ and Plato *Phaedo* 99d-100a, “So it seemed to me that I ought to take refuge in words (*logous*) and examine by means of those the *alētheia* of the things that are.”²¹

Another possibility is that Parmenides was intentionally drawing our attention to conflicts he found between the requisites for inquiry given the starting conceptions he identifies. Inquiry requires that we be able to distinguish things, but also that what-is be one and undivided; that steps be taken in a sequence but that there be no change and no “was” or “will be”; that nothing (including a stage or time) come to be or pass away; and that what-is be complete; and so on. The work of *dikē*, *anangkē*, and *moira* is required for inquiry, and these figures or forces are defined on and through mortals’ standard conceptions of things, defined on and through a world of things: living things and non-living things, members of various kinds and species, divine things and mortal things. Yet what they must enforce if inquiry is to be possible is at odds with the very characteristics of the things that inquiry would work with. Or so at least it seems when we reason from our starting point in our customary conceptions, a starting point that the proem and the use of plurals and negatives by the goddess reflect.²²

²⁰ DK21 B34: “And no man has seen what is clear nor will any know concerning gods and what I have said concerning everything; for even if one should happen to say just what has come to pass, nevertheless he would not know; but opinion is wrought over all.” και τὸ μὲν οὖν σαφὲς οὔτις ἀνὴρ ἶδεν οὐδέ τις ἔσται / εἰδὼς ἀμφὶ θεῶν τε καὶ ἄσσα λέγω περὶ πάντων· / εἰ γὰρ καὶ τὰ μάλιστα τύχοι τετελεσμένον εἰπών, / αὐτὸς ὅμως οὐκ οἶδε· δόκος δ’ ἐπὶ πᾶσι τέτυκται. B35: “Let these be supposed as being like the things that are true,” ταῦτα δεδοξάσθω μὲν εἰκότα τοῖς ἐτύμοισι. (Greek text is from Graham 2010.)

²¹ ἔδοξε δὴ μοι χρῆναι εἰς τοὺς λόγους καταφυγόντα ἐν ἐκείνοις σκοπεῖν τῶν ὄντων τὴν ἀλήθειαν. Socrates is reflecting on his earlier attempts to investigate the world by looking directly at it, on the assumption that what he has learned to say is, is what is. He notes that these attempts had led only to confusion. Distinguishing words and accounts from things might help him to understand what and where the problems were.

²² We see in the landscape of the proem not only aspects of the opinions of mortals presented in B8.51-61, B9, B10-18 (e.g. light, night, fire, dark, earth, sun), but also many of the ways of speaking and conceiving attributed to erring mortals in B8.38-41 (multiple moving and changing things). Thus the goddess’s speech is framed through, and she herself is a figure of, mortals’ opinions.

If either of these two alternatives reflect Parmenides' direction, then we might say he was exploring what we would seem to need to suppose concerning what-is in order to inquire, and finding that the suppositions appeared to lead to conflicts and impasses. We might also say he was looking at the possibility of ontology as an inquiry, asking whether and how we can study what is or being. Both of the alternatives presented in the last paragraph make it unlikely that he was "providing an ontology," i.e. providing a catalog of things that are. They would also make it unlikely that he was studying ontology in the sense of generating an account that could make unconditional statements about being. But we could see his asking about the possibility of a direct study of being, or about the coherence of the notion(s) of being, as itself a contribution to ontology. We could see his asking about the possibility of a direct study of non-being, or about the coherence of the notion(s) of non-being, as a contribution as well.

At this point questions may arise regarding Parmenides' goddess's second set of proposals about what is, those in her account of the opinions of mortals. I suggest that these too are part of Parmenides' meditation on and revelation of problems within the notion of being (and that of not-being), even as they enable the astronomical observations that have such remarkable descriptive success and scientific significance.²³ Parmenides B14 and B15 indicate that the moon shines not by its own light but by the light of the sun. Rossetti 2016 and 2017, Graham 2013, and Mourelatos 2013 among others have shown how this makes innovative use of observations that would have been available in the fifth century, and how these fragments might fit with reports that Parmenides grasped that the earth is spherical.²⁴

²³ It is quite possible that Parmenides meant his physiological work, such as the material on gestation in B17 and B18, also to have some predictive or descriptive success, though it fails to match today's understanding as well as the material about the moon does.

²⁴ B14: νυκτιφαῆς περὶ γαῖαν ἀλώμενον ἀλλότριον φῶς, "a night-shining light from another, wandering around the earth"; B15: αἰεὶ παπταίνουσα πρὸς αὐγὰς ἡελίου, "always looking around for the eyes of the sun.". On the *testimonia* related to this see also Bollack 2006, 280–284.

At the same time, these fragments invoke Light and Night and features associated with them; and the goddess indicates that in positing and accepting these, mortals have “wandered” (*peplanēmenoi*, B8.54). The astronomical fragments also invoke change, multiplicity, coming to be, and passing away, all of which the goddess has said are incompatible with the way one is to speak and conceive of what-is on the road of inquiry that she recommends. Thus the astronomical account seems to share a great deal with, or indeed to be part of, the complex of mortals’ opinions that the goddess deems untrustworthy.

It would go far beyond the scope of this essay to attempt to elucidate the relationship among the tale of the journey, the accounts of the roads to be avoided and of the recommended road inquiry, the scruples against the opinions of mortals, the presentation of mortals’ Light-Night conceptual scheme, and the astronomical and physiological proposals. The focus of the present section is simply on the question of whether the astronomical and physiological proposals are a straightforward retailing of Parmenides’ position on the nature of what-is. To that question, I think, the answer must be “not as far as we can tell.” If Parmenides thought that his astronomical discoveries enabled one to describe and predict celestial phenomena with accuracy unprecedented in Greek thought, it does not follow that he believed that this reflected that the cosmos was as he said it was, or that we could know that the Light-Night conceptual scheme was adequate and accurate for that purpose, or that the astronomical account he gave did not also lead to conflicts and impasses if one looked further. Here one might compare again Xenophanes B34 and B35, as well as Heraclitus B1 and B2. I suggest cautiously, then, that it would not be anachronistic to read Parmenides as showing reservations about claiming that what-is is as he says it is, even when things appear to work in ways that he describes.

Zeno

There are at least two features of Zeno's fragments that could also suggest reserve or ambivalence about a direct study of being or of what-is. First is the passages in fragments and *testimonia* that appear to distinguish between saying and being in a way that reflects tension. Second is Zeno's use of hypotheticals and conditionals — not the bare fact that he used them, but the manner and context of this use.

As an example of the first, showing tension between saying and being, Zeno DK 29 B1 offers that

If there are [multiple things], each must have some size (magnitude; *megethos*) and thickness (*pachos*) and each will keep off from (*apechein*) the other. But the same account (*logos*) goes for what is projecting (jutting out; *prouchontos*). For that will have size and something will project from it. And it is the same to say (*eipein*) this once and to say (*legein*) it always. . . .

This does not by itself show whether according to the report Zeno was suggesting that something we say is, is what is; or whether instead he was suggesting that there might be a difference, and a reason why we cannot assume that what-is is as we say it is. But if Zeno A21 is accurate, that fragment may show that Zeno had some interest in problems about saying and its distinction from what-is:

They say that Zeno said (*legein*) that if someone could explain (offer; *apodoiē*) to him what the one²⁵ is, he would be able to say (*legein*) the things that are (beings; *onta*).

What Zeno is reported to have said, then, is not “If anyone could explain to me what the one is, I could find an example of it” or “. . . I

²⁵ This term may be an anachronism introduced by Eudemus or Simplicius or their sources. But the statement attributed to Zeno would make good non-anachronistic sense if ‘the one’ (*to hen*) simply meant ‘the unit,’ i.e. any entity seen as a one. Or perhaps *to hen* in the paraphrase could refer to that which all the things that are have in common, the one “being” that they all share. In that case the report could make sense as something like “If someone could show me what it was to be one/when there is a one/what makes one thing one, then I would be able to say/talk about some examples of that.”

could point to and count individual things”; but rather “If anyone could explain to me what the one is, I could say the things that are.” The showing or explaining is supposed to be a basis or prerequisite for verbal identifications of whatever is.

Could this reflect a conflation of what is said to be with what-is, or a failure to distinguish between them? It could, but I think probably it does not. First, according to the report Zeno was not saying that a demonstration or explanation would prove or imply that things are, and that the things are as they are said to be (when one speaks correctly). Second, if the ideas expressed in this passage connect at all to the paradoxes of plurality, the paradox of place or space, and possibly those of motion, it seems that Zeno thought that the way we identify what-is, or the way we talk about what we say is, makes little sense and/or contradicts itself. He seemed to think that this is a problem.

If Zeno thought that some sort of principle of non-contradiction was supposed to apply to what-is, and if he found that what we say is inconsistent or incoherent, then it would make sense for him to conclude that our ways of speaking about what-is could not be adequate and accurate reflections of the way what-is is — effectively distinguishing, and not conflating, what is said and what-is. If on the other hand Zeno thought that a principle of non-contradiction was only supposed to apply to what is said (leaving aside whether that principle applies to what-is), then either he had already drawn a distinction between what-is and what is said about it, and had scruples about applying what applied to one side to the other, or he would have to reject what is (currently) said anyway because of its violations of non-contradiction. Then we have reason to think that Zeno would not conflate what is with what is said to be.

As noted, another feature of Zeno’s fragments might reflect reservations or ambivalence about a direct study of being or of what-is: the manner in which he is reported to have used hypothetical or conditional statements. Zeno phrased the surviving arguments about

plurality as conditionals,²⁶ and I find no evidence that he affirmed any of the antecedents of these conditionals nor that he advanced any conclusion about the nature or number of what-is.²⁷ In fact there may be some evidence that he did not affirm the antecedents or accept a positive conclusion about the nature or number of what-is.

Simplicius presents the arguments about plurality as starting from conditionals, specifically situations in which two possibilities are identified as analyses of a claim that there are multiple things, and then these are followed out. In other words, there is an “if there are many [things]” clause (B2), then a consideration of each option for analyzing that with respect to the question of whether the things have *megethos*, size: “if things have no size, it follows that...” (B2, Simplicius *In Phys.* 139.11-15); “if they have [a] size, it follows that...” (B1, *In phys.* 141.1-8)

From these reports, it is not clear whether Zeno concluded that there is only one thing (one being) or no things; or whether instead he found that the arguments about multiplicity did not entitle him to conclude anything specific about the number of things that are. In A16 Simplicius reports that according to Eudemus, Zeno “rejected the one” (*anēvrei to hen*). In A21, also reporting on Eudemus, Simplicius notes as we have seen that Zeno was said to have said that if someone could explain/show him what the/a one was, he would be able to say or talk about *ta onta*. It looks as though the antecedent in this statement attributed to Zeno in A21 was meant to express something contrary to fact, viz., “If someone could explain to me what the/a one is, then I would be able to say/speak about the things that are.” “But,” it seems Zeno would continue, “no one has been able to explain what the/a one

²⁶ There are hints that he also presented other arguments in terms of conditionals. See e.g. Aristotle *Physics* 239b5-9 on the Arrow argument (εἰ γὰρ ἀεὶ, φησίν, ἡρεμεῖ πᾶν . . .), 209a23-25 (εἰ γὰρ τὸ ὄν ἐν τόποις . . .) and 210b22-25 (εἰ ὁ τόπος ἔστι τι . . .) and Simplicius *In phys.* 563.17-20 on place, and Simplicius *In Phys.* 1108.18-28 on the Millet Seed argument.

²⁷ Palmer 2017, 14 notes this pattern with respect to the argument about limited and unlimited, but thinks that this could be a result of a loss in transmission.

is, and I have not been able to find out any other way, so I cannot speak about the things that are.”

Now, the form of the statement attributed to Zeno does not by itself indicate a contrary-to-fact character. It is not a form in which the apodosis always refers to something that did not happen or was not real. But it would not make sense for Zeno to make this statement if he thought he could talk about *ta onta* without being shown what the/a one was, or if he thought he could figure out what the/a one was without someone helping. And there are no reports of any claims of his about what the one is, or about what it is to be one thing. Putting these considerations together, it looks as though Zeno meant the remark to suggest that he had found no account of what a/the one was, and that for this reason he could not talk about *ta onta*.

If Zeno did mean the remark in this way, then not only was he not presenting a direct account of what it is to be a thing, or of the nature of what-is; he was indicating that he could not present such an account.²⁸ In that case, his contribution to the study of ontology would be first of all pointing out problems with the notions of being, unity, plurality, motion, distinction, and difference that people around him used. This does not by itself imply that Zeno concluded that nothing is, or that nothing is one, or many, or changeable, etc. It could mean simply that he found that one could not speak about or study anything designated as a one, as a plurality, as a difference, or the like without deriving contradictions or impasses. In fact, one possible result of this kind of discovery could be a caution against making direct unconditional statements such as “There is one being” or “There is no being.”

It is curious, too, that although the sources for his work say that Zeno said that something is and that he espoused certain claims about its nature and number, the sources do not present anything they say is a

²⁸ Cf. Cordero 1988, especially 121-123; and Palmer 2017, 16.

quotation, or anything that looks like one, where Zeno says that sort of thing.²⁹ It is possible that Zeno's work did include some affirmations that what-is is and that it has certain characteristics, and that we have now lost those portions. But it is also possible that his work did not include that kind of statement at all. The features we have considered so far would make it especially consistent for him to eschew that kind of statement.

Melissus

Of the three thinkers, Melissus appears most clearly to espouse a set of direct unconditional claims about the nature of what-is. In earlier work I took that appearance to be decisive.³⁰ I am no longer so sure that it is. Melissus makes extensive use of conditional and hypothetical reasoning. Sometimes he affirms an antecedent in a way that seems to amount to a declaration that something is, or that something is a certain way. In other places, however, the extant fragments do not show him affirming the antecedent. Therefore we must ask what his fragments show and whether there might be indications that on certain crucial issues, Melissus would not go as far as to make a direct unconditional statement about what-is. In other words, his work's relationship to ontology may also be complex, though not necessarily the same as those of Parmenides or Zeno.

Of especial importance, in an examination of what Melissus might have declared to be the case regarding what-is, will be indications as to which claims he sees as most fundamental, which ones he presents

²⁹ Examples of sources attributing various direct claims about the nature and number of what-is to Zeno include Simplicius *In phys.* 140.27-34 (Zeno B3) and conceivably 99.10-12 (Zeno A16); Philoponus *In phys.* 42.15-17, though he does indicate that (according to Zeno?) the result only follows if one assumes that the only possibilities are that there be one thing or many and that one of the possibilities must be accepted; Seneca *Letters* 88.44-45 (Zeno A21); Diogenes Laertius *Lives* 9.72.6-7 (Zeno B4).

³⁰ Cherubin 2003 and 2005.

as supporting the others. Since his work evidently relied heavily on chains of deductions, we would do well to look for the assertions that seem to occur toward the beginnings of the chains.

Simplicius says at *In phys.* 103.13–15 that Melissus began his writing on coming to be and passing away with the remark “If there is nothing/if nothing is, how could it be discussed as if it were something/ as if something were?”³¹ The argument continued by examining the consequences of the supposition “if there is something/if something is” (*ei de ti estin*).

It is striking, I think, that according to Simplicius (and, as we will see, to the author of *De Melisso, de Xenophane, de Gorgia*), Melissus began by presenting “If there is nothing” and “If there is something” as suppositions or hypotheses. At no point in this argument does Melissus affirm or conclude that something is. At some points he draws conclusions about what-is (“Therefore what-is does not come to be. Therefore it always is, nor does what-is perish,” οὐκ ἄρα γινόμενόν ἐστι τὸ ὄν. ἀεὶ ὄν ἄρα ἐστίν, οὔτε φθαρήσεται τὸ ὄν, 103.19–20). But these need not signal that Melissus has accepted that anything is. They could be categorical statements about what what-is would have to be like if it is (or, if something is), based on the implications of saying that it is, and based on the criterion that its account be consistent. Melissus does not say that there must be, or that there happens to be, something that fits the characteristics that he deduces as characterizing what-is. More would be needed in order to establish that Melissus had concluded that what-is is (or that something is), and why he had concluded that.

Clarke 2019, 59–60 proposes that Melissus concludes that what-is is, because Melissus is speaking about it. While I would not dismiss that reasoning immediately, there are reasons to hesitate to accept Clarke’s suggestion.

³¹ See Harriman 2017 and Galgano 2019 for support of the view that this represents the beginning of Melissus’ arguments and that the material within quotations is probably Melissus’ rather than Simplicius’. See Galgano 2019 for a discussion of important differences between Parmenides’ not-being (*mē eon, ouk eon*) and Melissus’ nothing (*mēden*).

First, Simplicius has Melissus say “If nothing is, how could it be discussed as if it were something?” and then turn to considering the supposition “if something is, . . .” This turn suggests that Melissus would answer his own question by saying that if nothing is, it cannot be discussed as if it were something. But Clarke seems to make a further interpretive move. He has Melissus assume something like the inverse³²: that if something is, we can speak of it as though it is something. This may be too hasty. For Melissus distinguishes between making statements based on rightly (*orthōs*) observing and understanding, and making statements based on flawed or inaccurate observation and understanding (B8). He says that we speak about a world of multiple, moving, changing things as though those things are (and are something), or that we think we do. He notes that when speaking this way, we say we are perceiving rightly; and he charges that we are wrong to say this. If Melissus thinks it is possible to speak wrongly, in the sense of averring that flawed understandings and observations are accurate, then the mere fact that he speaks about what-is as though it is does not mean that he accepts that what-is is.

For Melissus, speaking rightly, or at least not wrongly, seems to involve speaking in a way that does not imply contradictions or impossibilities.³³ Perhaps Melissus has in mind that being able to speak rightly about a thing that is goes along with the thing really being. But does he hold that we can speak rightly about what-is? As we will see below, he may well hold that speaking rightly involves saying things that are consistent with one another. Then does he take speaking rightly to be possible *only* if what is said or spoken of really is; does he take a consistent account to imply the reality of what it characterizes?

There is a further problem. Clarke would have Melissus infer from the premises

³² Assuming that Melissus understands ‘something’ as the negation of ‘nothing,’ and vice versa.

³³ His reasoning often suggests that he has something like this in mind, and he articulates it at *In de cael.* 559.5–9. DK30 A5/ *De MXG* 974b2–8 presents a similar idea.

If something is, we can speak of it as though it is something.

and

We are speaking of what-is [as if it is something].

to the conclusion

What-is/Something is.

This inference has the form

If P, then Q

Q

therefore

P

Not only is this inference logically questionable (though it is not clear that Melissus would have grasped that), but it also assumes that Melissus thinks we actually can speak of what-is as if it is something, and that he further assumes that this means that that which is spoken of rightly (in a way that does not involve impossibilities or contradictions) really is as it is spoken of. But does he?

One passage that may suggest that Melissus thought that what is spoken of rightly really is as it is spoken of is in B8. Yet here too some caution applies. According to Simplicius, Melissus proposes to argue that “If many [things] were, they would need to be just such as I say the one is” (*In de caelo* 558.22-23). He concludes the argument by saying, “So in this way, if many [things] were, they would need to be just such as the one is” (559.11-12). The move from ‘such as I say the one is’ to ‘such as the one is,’ if it is not an artifact of Simplicius’ transmission, appears to conflate the way something is with the way that Melissus says it is when one is avoiding inconsistency (559.6). But the fact that it involves conditionals and is presented as the result of argument raises questions about the status of the apparent conflation.³⁴

Thus whereas Clarke’s suggestion seems plausible, so too does the

³⁴ The same seems to apply at *De MXG* 974a24. Palmer 2017, 17-19 holds that Melissus “belongs to the early history of aporetic reasoning” but that he resolves, or believes he resolves, the apparent contradictions identified in B8.

possibility that Melissus was trying to work out whether or to what extent it is possible to speak rightly (with consistency and sense) about what-is as something; and what the consequences of that would be. Let us now examine some further passages and features that provide support for the second possibility.

Melissus A5, the passage that opens the portion of *De MXG* on Melissus, starts with “[He] says that if something is, it is everlasting, since it is not possible for anything to come to be from nothing”³⁵ Melissus then argues, according to the text, for the position that nothing that is would not be everlasting. But the text does not report that Melissus drew from this the conclusion that there is something everlasting. Nor does it show that Melissus either concluded or assumed that anything is at all. In fact, the last clause could equally be translated as ‘if indeed it is not possible for anything to come from nothing’; the connective *eiper* with the present indicative in Attic can connote assent to a supposition, but need not.³⁶

All of our sources indicate that from the supposition that something is, a supposition that Melissus *identified as a supposition*, Melissus deduced that what-is must be one, ungenerated, everlasting, unchanging, unlimited and/or unbounded (*apeiron*), whole, complete, homogeneous, not lacking, and without pain or illness or void, among other characteristics. All of these are presented as inferences from the supposition that something is, plus some principles that Melissus seems to take as axiomatic.³⁷ These axiomatic principles, however, do not assert that something is. They are generic statements: they apply to whatever, if anything, might be. The principles include that no thing can come from nothing (B1 and A5) (or that if nothing is, then no thing can

³⁵ Ἄϊδιον εἶναι φησιν εἴ τι ἔστιν, εἴτερ μὴ ἐνδέχασθαι γενέσθαι μηδὲν ἐκ μηδενός (974a2-3).

³⁶ *LSJ* s.v. *eiper*; Denniston 1950 (448n1) cautions that it does not always reflect confidence in an assertion, citing Plato *Protagoras* 319a and *Laws* 902a, and Aristophanes *Frogs* 634; cases where the speaker clearly doubts the truth of a statement.

³⁷ On this structure, cf. Brémond 2017, 67–70.

come from nothing)³⁸; that to be always is not accomplished (not possible) for something that is not wholly (B2); that that which is nothing (*to mēden*) would not be (B7); and that what has come to be has a beginning (B2/Simplicius *In phys.* 109.21-22 and Simplicius *In phys.* 103.24).

The fragments of Melissus do contain some remarks that look like unconditional declarations about what-is, including some that may look like claims that what-is is. However, their contexts raise questions about that interpretation. For example, B1 argues that ἀεὶ ἦν ὅ τι ἦν καὶ ἀεὶ ἔσται, “That which was always, was and will be always.” This is not the same as a declaration or an argument that something always was. We can read this as a generic use of *to on*, so it may well mean that if something always was, it was and always will be. An English parallel might be the warning, “Do not go beyond this point — trespassers will be prosecuted.” To post a sign with that warning does not imply that anyone has ever trespassed in the posted area, or even that anyone is able to trespass (the sign could be posted because the injunction applies to all locations of a certain type, regardless of whether they are actually accessible to humans).

Other examples of this kind of statement include Simplicius *in phys.* 103.25-26, “Further, that which perishes has an end.”³⁹ This does not seem to be a claim that there is anything that actually perishes; in fact, this follows directly on, and relies on, an argument to the effect that what-is does not perish (and B8 will argue that the things that appear to perish could not be). The next sentences are, “But if something is unperishing, it does not have an end. Then what-is (*to on*), being unperishing, does not have an end.”⁴⁰ Thus “that which perishes has an end” seems to mean not “there is something that perishes, and it has an

³⁸ *De MXG* 975b5 explicitly identifies this as a *doxa* from which Melissus begins.

³⁹ ἔτι δὲ τὸ φθειρόμενον τελευτήν ἔχει.

⁴⁰ εἰ δὲ τί ἐστιν ἀφθαρτον, τελευτήν οὐκ ἔχει. τὸ ὄν ἄρα ἀφθαρτον ὄν τελευτήν οὐκ ἔχει.

end,” but rather, “if there is something that perishes, it has an end; perishing implies having an end.” And “what-is, being unperishing, does not have an end” seems to refer to the fact that the arguments just offered (103.13–24) had concluded that if there is something, then that something (evidently understood as what-is) will not perish. As noted above, that passage does not include any affirmation that something is. “What-is, being unperishing, does not have an end” may be understood as “If what-is is unperishing, it does not have an end.” The participle *on* after *aphtharton* can connote a condition, viz., when/in the case that being or what-is is unperishing.

Similar-seeming uses of participles appear frequently in *De MXG*. 974a14–15 reads, ἀίδιον δὲ ὄν ἄμετρον τε καὶ ὅμοιον πάντα ἀκίνητον εἶναι τὸ ἔν, “Being (*on*) everlasting, without measure and everywhere alike, the one is unmoving.”⁴¹ The first clause can I think be understood as “Since it is everlasting” (as e.g. Graham 2010), “In the case that what-is is everlasting,” “Seeing as how our prior arguments have implied that it is everlasting,” or something similar. The ambiguity itself may be significant. What is clear is that the claim that there is one everlasting being is the result of a series of deductions. So far we have not seen evidence that Melissus thinks that all of the premises of those deductions have been confirmed such that there is a being and that it is everlasting.

Other locutions in Melissus that might look like a direct claim about the nature or number of what-is include passages that are introduced with *houtōs*, ‘thus’ or ‘in this way,’ or *epeidē*, ‘since.’ Both of those words, I suggest instead, refer to results of previous arguments. That is, Melissus uses *houtōs* to mean something like “Thus, given what we have said, . . .” or “In this way [recalling results of prior inferences] . . .” He uses *epeidē* to introduce something that follows from

⁴¹ The phrase ‘the one’ may not be Melissus’ own wording. It seems reasonable to interpret the phrase as referring to his single undivided *to on*, what-is.

what he has inferred so far; nothing in the fragments and reports suggests that he uses it to introduce something that he thinks follows from a new and independent claim.⁴²

None of the reports that claim to quote or to paraphrase Melissus' work show any direct unconditional affirmation by Melissus that anything is. These sources do not hesitate to attribute to Melissus the view that what-is is, and that it is one, unmoving, ungenerated, unperishing, and so on. Yet they do not provide any indication that Melissus said that there is something that is (or that he said that there is not). Again, as with Zeno, this is striking because if Melissus had articulated a view that a commentator attributed to him, we might think that the commentator would wish to demonstrate this with a quotation.

What might be the point of Melissus' reflections, if not to try to establish that what-is is one, unmoving, unchanging, and everlasting? Like Parmenides and Zeno, he may have been concerned about whether it was possible to develop a way of speaking and reflecting in which what is would be as we say it is.⁴³ This is not new: Heraclitus had drawn attention to the fact that many of the things we say are, and that we pick out and identify according to sensory experience, appear differently at different times or from different perspectives or standpoints or to different observers. The same thing may have, or appear to have, different qualities; or something may be understood as one, as many, and/or as part of something else. The fragments of Heraclitus do not make explicit what if any sort of problem Heraclitus might find in this regarding how all things⁴⁴ are, though e.g. his fragments B1, B8, and B72 suggest that humans' attempts to identify and characterize things are incomplete, conflicting, and incommensurable with the *logos*

⁴² *Epeidē*: De MXG 974b3, Simplicius *In phys.* 103.24; *houtōs*: B7/*In phys.* 111.19, B8/*In de cael.* 559.11–12, and cf. A5/*De MXG* 974b23.

⁴³ Cf. Palmer 2017, 17–18.

⁴⁴ To refer to the things that are or seem to be in general, Heraclitus does not use terms such as *to con* or *ta conta*, but rather *panta* ('all things,' 'everything').

according to which all things happen.

Melissus notes similar situations in B8, and is explicit about how and why these situations cause problems: he holds that contradictions are a problem and that a contradictory account of what-is cannot be right. He seems to think that if something is described in a contradictory way, it cannot be as it is described.⁴⁵ He seeks a consistent, an “agreeing” (*homologeîn*, B8) account of what-is *qua* what-is.

Where contradictions arise, it seems that Melissus seeks either to find in one of the contradictory alternatives something that is to be accepted or rejected based on whether it agrees with his axioms; or to find in the framing presuppositions of the contradictory alternatives something that conflicts with the axioms he has accepted.⁴⁶ When he rejects an alternative, as for example in B1 when he rejects the possibility that what-is came to be, or in B2 when he rejects the possibility that what-is begins or ends, he does so on the basis of contradictions he finds between the rejected alternative and some axiom he accepts (such as that no thing can come from nothing), or the consequences he has already derived from the axioms and the supposition that anything is. This is sometimes expressed, in the testimonia, in terms such as *ou . . . anuston*⁴⁷ (“not accomplished,” as e.g. B2/ *In phys.* 109.24; B7 / *In phys.* 111.25) or negated forms of *dunamai* (“be able,” “it is possible,” as e.g. *ouk an dunaito* B6; *adunata* A5/ *De*

⁴⁵ Melissus’s fragments do not provide reasons or any limited context for this. One might contrast Parmenides’ goddess, who presents contradictions as unacceptable on the road of inquiry she recommends, implying that contradictions are problems in so far as they are incompatible with inquiry.

⁴⁶ An example of the latter strategy would be B8, *In de cael.* 559.9 where he rejects claims that the same thing is both hot and cold on the grounds that this implies change, while what is real (*alēthē*), what really is, does not undergo change. That what-is does not change is the conclusion of arguments in B1, B2, and B7, all of which seem to precede B8.

⁴⁷ A term first attested at Parmenides DK28 B2.7; the goddess warns that indicating or knowing *to mē eon* is not accomplished.

MXG 974a23, oude . . . dunaton A5/ De MXG 974b4).⁴⁸

It does seem that Melissus held that what is could not be in a contradictory way; it would then both be and not be what is (B8). But that does not address the question of whether he thought that that which is not contradictory must be, nor the question of whether he thought that what is must be as a non-contradictory account of it would specify, nor the question of whether he thought that what is must be as we say it is in a non-contradictory account. Perhaps he did not see these questions himself. Even if he did not, still part of the value of his work is in raising them for us, that is, in revealing difficulties at the roots of the projects and practices of ontology. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence; the fact that Melissus is not quoted as having stated that what-is is and that it must be as a non-contradictory account says it is may be an omission. But his text offers the possibility that it is not an omission, and that Melissus saw reason to hold back from such affirmations and so from a straightforward attempt to affirm the real being and nature of what is.

The Eleatics and ontology: problems and relationships

If the foregoing analyses are appropriate, then none of the three Eleatic philosophers engages in ontology in the sense of offering a direct and unconditional catalog of what-is. Neither, if these analyses are apt, does any of the three engage in ontology in the sense of considering any notion of being or of what-is as unproblematic enough to study as an adequate and accurate way of accounting for what is. Yet all three engage with ontology as a problem. Each shows us, leads us into, factors that undermine the possibility of presenting a direct, unconditional, or consistent account of what-is, given the starting assumptions and ways

⁴⁸ *De MXG 974a2* also has *mē endechesthai*, “it is not possible,” but this seems to be a summary by the author of *De MXG* and may not be original.

of speaking that they identify.

Does this mean that Parmenides, Zeno, and/or Melissus was aware that his findings would interfere with his capacity to present a direct, unconditional, consistent account of what-is? Given Parmenides' careful craftsmanship and undeniable emphasis on roads of inquiry; and given the remarkable absence of quotations, in the commentaries on Zeno and Melissus, of the direct unconditional statements about the nature of what-is that the commentators thought were the point of those philosophers' arguments; I would say that it is entirely possible that each was aware of such problems. It would not, I suggest cautiously, be anachronistic to attribute such an awareness to the Eleatics. One might see this aspect of their work as a reflection on and further development of Xenophanes' caution in B34 against assuming that descriptive or predictive success is always confirmable by humans or that it is reflective of understanding. One might also compare Heraclitus' admonition that on listening to the *logos* it is wise to agree that all things (he uses the plural *panta*) are one: why it is wise to agree to this, and how what is many is also one, are not clarified but are represented by a *logos*, an account or word.

Yet even if these considerations do not establish that Parmenides, Zeno, or Melissus was aware of the way in which his work destabilized and undermined attempts to develop a direct and unconditional account of being or of what-is, we inquirers of today can take up and learn from the destabilizing features. Today, the possibilities and the needs for intercultural dialogue (and thus dialogue among conceptual frameworks) are increasing. The need and opportunity for redress and remedy of historical inequities and exclusions, both social and epistemic, are ever more clear and urgent. At such a time, scholarly integrity and justice call for difficult self-reflection on matters most fundamental to our view of what is and how to communicate and treat it. In this climate, then, the Eleatic destabilizations can be of more than academic importance.

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