Epistemological Relevance of Parmenides’ Ontology

Guido Calenda
Professor at the University of Roma Tre

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6899-9522
guido.calenda@gmail.com

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

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


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

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

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

At the end of the Proem, a goddess tells his pupil (Parmenides) that she will teach him everything. The plural πάντα involves two different kind of teachings: one is “Ἀληθείης εὐκυκλέος ² ἀτρεμές ἦτορ” (“the unshakable heart of the well circular Truth”), and the other touches “βροτῶν δόξας, ταῖς οὐκ ἐνι πίστις ἀληθής” (“the opinions of the mortals, in which there is no true reliance”). Thus, the word ‘everything’ includes both a single true teaching, and a plurality of mortals’ opinions. Parmenides develops these teachings in two separate


² εὐκυκλέος Simp. in Cael. 557.26; εὐπειθέος Sext. M. 7.111.35; εὐφεγγέος Procl. In Ti. 345.15. Cerri, 1999, p. 184: “Delle tre lezioni quella di Simplicio si configura senz’altro come lectio difficilior” (“Of the three variants, Simplicius’s one is undoubtedly lectio difficilior”).
parts of the Poem, traditionally named ‘Truth’ (Ἀλήθεια) and ‘Opinion’ (Δόχα).

Being: the basic insight

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

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

λεύσσες3 δ’ ὁμοίως ἀπεόντα νόωι παρεόντα βεβαίως·
οὐ γὰρ ἀποτιμῆσαι τὸ ἐόν τοῦ ἐόντος ἔχεσθαι
οὔτε σκιδάμενον πάντι πάντως κατὰ κόσμον
οὔτε συνιστάμενον.

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

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

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

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to the things we conceive in our mind.

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

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

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Note that Parmenides never mentions the void (κενεόν); it is Melissus who identifies the ‘void’ with non-being: “τὸ γὰρ κενεὸν οὐδὲν ἐστιν” (“the void is nothing”) (30 B 7.7). Because of this, the Atomists scorn him (Arist. Metaph. 985B.4). Curd, 1998, p. 182: “for Leucippus and Democritus calling void ‘not-being’ is clearly provocative.”
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πείρας πύματον, τετελεσμένον ἐστί,⁵
πάντωθεν εὐκύκλου σφαίρης ἐναλίγκιον ὀγκωί,
μεσοθέν ἰσοπαλὲς πάντη· τὸ γὰρ οὔτε τι μείζον
οὔτε τι βαϊότερον πελέναι χρεόν ἐστι τῇ ἢ τῇ.

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

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

Being: the logical demonstration

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

One can reasonably doubt that a tautology could provide

punctuation is preferable”.

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

⁷ This, in my opinion, is the meaning of the compact form ἔστιν in the first hemistich of verse 2.3.
informative value: thus, are we stranded into a logical void? I do not think so: in this case, the tautology is a way to put in logical form Parmenides’ basic awareness that existence is a compact continuum. It is also possible to conceive this awareness as an empirical fact. We shall see that this fact involves striking consequences about human knowledge.

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

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

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8 ἄρξει, Cordero, 1979, p. 21-24; Nehamas, 1981, p. 97-111: “πρώτης γὰρ σ’ (οι) ἀφ’ ὀδοὺ ταύτης διζήσιος ἄρξει”.

9 Galgano, 2017, p. 76: “tutti o quasi tutti gli studiosi notano l’opposizione fatta da Parmenide fra i brotoi che nulla sanno e l’eidota φῶτα di B 1.3” (“all or almost all the scholars comment on Parmenides’ opposition between the brotoi who know nothing and the eidota φῶτα of B1.3”).
the human mind, and then, in 8.38–41, what human knowledge is instead.

Knowledge of being

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

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

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

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

The same concept we find in verses 8.34–36: “ταύτων δ’ ἔστὶ νοεῖν τε καὶ οὖνεκεν ἔστι νόημα. / οὐ γὰρ ἄνευ τοῦ ἐόντος, ἐν οἷῳ πεφατισμένον ἔστιν, / εὑρήσεις τὸ νοεῖν” (“The same is to know and on account of which is knowledge. For without being, in which it is expressed, you will not find knowledge”).

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

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

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

The god of Heraclitus personifies true knowledge, to which man

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

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

Two-headed mortals

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

Fragment 7 begins by the following statement: “οὐ γὰρ μὴποτε τοῦτο δομῆν εἶναι μὴ ἑόντα” (“in fact, never it could be imposed that non-being exists”). Indeed, to force non-being to exist would be a plain contradiction. As the following verse (7.2) clearly states, the goddess restrains her pupil from following the second route of inquiry, the one that denies existence and leads nowhere. Parmenides explains, then, what are the psychological factors that usually deceive men, driving them on this second impassable route. Men are prevented to perceive the unity of being by the habit\textsuperscript{14} (ἔθος) to countless experiences (πολύπειρον): the superficial use of sight (νομιμάν ἁσκοπον ὁμμα), which distinguish one object from another; the ringing hearing (ἡχήεσσαν ἀκουήν), choked by words uttered by the language; and the language itself (γλῶσσα), which names objects as if they were separate beings.\textsuperscript{15} Two-headed mortals are so used to name things, and to recognize them when they see or hear them, that they perceive all those things as distinct beings, separated from the rest of being. They do not understand that all those things are images formed in their own minds by carving them out of the totality of being, following human needs and personal points of view. Because of this, the goddess harshly condemn them in verses 6.4–9.

**Signs on the route of being**

Having explained what leads two-headed mortals astray, the

\textsuperscript{14} Tarán, 1965, p. 73: “inured habit”.

\textsuperscript{15} Mansfeld, 1999, p. 331: “Chez Parménide, la mention de l’œil, de l’oreille et de la langue, vise à évoquer, de manière indifférenciée, le comportement cognitif, et l’expérience, des hommes en général” (“In Parmenides, the mention of the eye, the ear and the tongue aims to evoke, in an undifferentiated way, the cognitive behaviour, and the experience, of men in general”). In my opinion, Parmenides does not imply that all the mortals are lead astray by their senses. Only the double-headed ones are deceived, those who do not understand that the objects they perceive are not true beings, but only products of their mind.
goddess has nothing else to add about the second route of inquiry, and in fragment 8 she takes up again the first route, which affirms existence. Here the goddess does not teach anything new, she just shows different aspects of what she has already said about the first route of inquiry: along this route, there are many signs (σήματα) – all milestones that mark the same path – equivalent formulations of the path of Persuasion (Πειθοῦς κέλευθος). Since being is the totality of what exists, it is ‘unbegotten’ (ἀγένητον) and ‘imperishable’ (ἀνώλεθρον), for if something existed before or after, it would be part of being (8.3). Being is obviously ‘whole’ (οὖλον) and ‘unique’ (μουνογενές);16 and it is also ‘unmoved’ (ἀτρέμες), and ‘complete’ (τελεστόν)17 (8.4). Complete is easily understandable: given that being is the totality of what exists, nothing is lacking, but why ‘unmoved’? Immobility is perhaps the most disconcerting attribute of Parmenides’ being: to understand it, we must remember fragments 4 and 3, and the equivalent passages of fragment 8. For us the world changes in time and in space: we see an infinite variety of objects which form, change, disappear: how can a logical demonstration claim to erase this multiform and ever changing reality? The fact is that Parmenides is not speaking of how we see the world, but of being itself. His outlook here is ontological, and since being is an unbroken whole, its true knowledge is necessarily holistic – apprehended all together at once – thus, a kind of knowledge we cannot even imagine. Knowledge of being, which identifies with being itself, includes the totality of what exists, and thus, includes also what we

16 οὖλον μουνογενές (Simp. In Ph. 145.4, 78.13, 30.2, 120.23, In Cael. 557.18); ἐστι γὰρ οὐλομελὲς (Plu. Adv. Col. 1114C.10); οὖλον μουνομελές, (Procl. In Parm. 1152.19 Cousin). I keep μουνογενές as ‘unique’, which does not necessarily contradicts ἀγένητον.

17 ἢδη τελεστόν (Simp. In Ph. 145.4, 78.13, 30.2); ἢδη ἀγένητον (Simp. In Ph. 120.23, In Cael. 557.18). Covotti, 1908, p. 424-427, and Goebel, 1910, p. 100 suggest ἢδη τελεστόν, followed by Tarán, 1965, p. 81, who adds (p. 94): “There is no doubt that Parmenides did refer to the characteristic ‘completeness’ as is demonstrated by fr. VIII.32”. Owen, 1958, p. 77, writes that τελεστόν “it is paleographically simpler but the adjective is not securely attested in Greek”, and suggests ἢδη τελεστόν, followed by Mourelatos, 1970, p. 281.
conceive as space and time: there is not a ‘meta-time’, in which such a totality could change. Verses 8.5-6 clearly stress this concept: “οὐδὲ ποτ’ ἦν οὐδ’ ἔσται, ἐπεὶ νῦν ἔστιν ὁμοῖον πᾶν, / ἐν, συνεχές” (“nor was it once, nor will it be, since it is entirely now at one time, one, continuous”).

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

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

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

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

19 Reale & Ruggiu, 1991, p. 291: “Né può sussistere alcuna ragione sufficiente affinché una cosa nasca in alcun tempo, prima o dopo, dal momento che il suo inizio è dal nulla.” (“Nor can there be any sufficient reason for a thing to be born at any time, before or after, since its beginning is from nothing”). See also Mourelatos & Pulpito, 2018, p. 122.
deny birth even admitting time – a counterfactual hypothesis for Parmenides – does not prevent that the birth of being is much more strictly denied by the fact that being is already, in itself, the whole, which includes the totality of what exists, so that neither a time ‘before’ it nor one ‘after’ it are conceivable.\textsuperscript{20} Melissus trivializes\textsuperscript{21} the concept stating that being is infinite and eternal, but Parmenides does not mention neither infinity nor eternity, because space and time are not separate beings in which being is located. Thus, all we can say about ontology reduces to one single being, which (8.29–30) “ταὐτόν τ’ ἐν ταὐτῶι τε μένον καθ’ ἑαυτό τε κεῖται / χούτως ἐμπέδον αὐθί μένει” (“remaining the same in the same, on itself lies / and there steadfast remains”).

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

\textit{Ontology: an image}

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

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

\textsuperscript{20} See Calenda, 2011, 169.

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

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

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

Parmenides’ ontological analysis did not describe being, whose infinite richness remains unfathomable and lost forever. The goddess analyzed only one aspect of being: its bare existence, and her ‘πίστις ἀληθής’ (true persuasion) is colorless and barren. To communicate with his human pupil, she was forced to use the language of men, and all the so-called ‘attributes of being’ are nothing else than human attempt to
express the undifferentiated continuity of existence. The goddess succeeded in rigorously proving only one thing, namely, that being is unfathomable and ineffable; it follows that men must drop any pretense that their ‘truths’ represent the reality of being.

**Human knowledge**

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

τῶι πάντι ὄνομ(α) ἔσται,  
όσσα βροτοὶ κατέθεντο πεποιθότες εἶναι ἀληθῆ,  
γίγνεσθαί τε καὶ ἀλλυσθαί, εἶναι τε καὶ οὐχί,  
kai τόπον ἀλλάσσειν διά τε χρόνον ἀμείβειν.

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

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

We see now that the double-headed mortals of verse 6.5, are the men who do not perceive that the mountain, the river, the town, the hot, the good, and so on... are just human concepts referring to parts and aspects of being selected by them, following both traditional criteria
and personal points of view. Thus, they are unaware that their knowledge does not catch being itself, but, at best, some limited features of a minimal part of it, observed from human and personal perspectives. Since they do not understand that, they trust that the world is exactly as they conceive it, or, at least, that truth is within their grasp. This is not a trifling error; rather it is an issue at the core of the philosophical debate from the fifth century up to Plato and beyond.

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

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

Nowhere does Parmenides claim that to give up certain truth is somehow avoidable: the true discourse ended in verse 8.49, and did not
say much about the world. This is the reason why, after verse 8.52, the words of the goddess are deceptive (ἀπατηλὸν): she does not teach anymore the “the unshakable heart of the well circular Truth” (1.29), but she starts to describe “the opinions of the mortals, in which there is no true reliance” (1.30): these opinions are always questionable, but nevertheless useful for men. The opinions the goddess teaches are the scientific doctrines of Parmenides. Showing a confidence not altogether unjustified, Parmenides declares (8.60–61) that his description of the world is better than any other human notion will ever be.

Ontological paradoxes

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

23 Just as Wittgenstein recognized in the preface to his Tractatus: “the second thing in which the value of this work consists is that it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved.” (transl. Pears and McGuinness, 1961, p. 4).
This seems to be an ontological solution of the riddle: the permanence of the river is due to some regularity of its being; but this would not be Parmenides answer: for him, as for Heraclitus, the identity of the river is a human convention. Men give the river its name, and continue to consider it the same object despite its changes. It is not a matter of ontology; it is a matter of language and of convenience: men consider it useful to identify that part of being as a single changing object, and name it ‘river’. The same is the case of Epicarmos’ riddle about the man who refuses to pay back his debts since, having changed, he is now another person (23B2.18–21). Plutarch (d. sera num. vind. 559A) calls it ‘the argument of growth’ (ὁ αὐξόµενος λόγος). This argument appears a paradox only as far as we seek an ontological solution, but we do not need to do that: men keep the name as long as it suits them, and, clearly, it would be unpractical to accept the idea that a fellow loses his individuality simply because he becomes older or has a leg taken off.

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

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


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

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

\(^{27}\) See Calenda, 2013, p. 129–130.
segment space and time in infinite elements. Let us examine the well known ‘Achilles’ (Arist. *Ph.* 239B.14): suppose, for simplicity sake, that the turtle starts 100 m in advance, that Achilles’ speed is only twice that of the turtle, and that Achilles reaches the starting point of the turtle in one minute. Then Achilles reaches the turtle in two minutes having run 200 m. Zeno divides space and time in infinite elements, each half the length of the preceding one. The series still converges to two minutes and to 200 m in infinite steps; but, if the elements were real *beings*, Achilles would not be able to reach all of them, for they are infinite; so he would not reach the turtle, and time would not reach two minutes. Nevertheless, since Achilles reaches the turtle, it is impossible that the elements of this partition are true *beings*. To better visualize the argument, Thomson (Thomson 1955, 1-13) uses the example of a lamp that turns on and off at intervals of time that halve in succession: assuming that the first time interval is one minute, the sum of all the intervals converges to two minutes: after two minutes how is the light, on or off? There is no answer, because the process has no end, even if it has stopped after two minutes. Strictly speaking, the so-called arguments ‘against motion’ are not against motion at all: they use our perception of motion to prove that *being* is a single compact whole. We can understand these arguments as counterfactual thought experiments: they show that, if the objects conceived by us were the objective reality – that is, if *being* was composed of the plurality of elements which we recognize in it – we could conceive a partition of space in such a way as to make movement impossible. Parmenides would answer that the time intervals are not real *beings*, but only ‘names’ we give, a product of our mind, and what we have in mind does not change what is going on.28 One might wonder why space should be segmented in such a perverse way, as to prevent Achilles from reaching the turtle; but this is precisely

28 Thus, Parmenides answer would not be very far from that given by Aristode, who makes use of the distinction between ‘potency’ and ‘act’ (*Phys.* VI 2, 233a 21).
the point: are the elements that we detect in the world separate beings in themselves, or is it only our mind that separates them? This might be the reason why Zeno’s book included up to forty arguments (Procl. *In Parm.* 694.23; Elias, *In Cat.* 109.17): perhaps, by using a nearly exhaustive series of examples, he tried to show the contradictions in which one stumbles when admitting a plurality of beings.

*After Parmenides*

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

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

In the third thesis of his work ‘On the Non-existent or On Nature’, Gorgias treats the same topic ([Arist.] *De MXG* 980B.8–14): the listener knows the words the speaker uses, and he recognizes them; but what he has in mind is not exactly the same as the speaker has in mind, since he
is not the same person, and his mental organization is different. Thus, communication between the speaker and the listener is complex, and if the speaker wants to persuade the listener, he has to know what he must say, in order to make the listener understand what he wants him to understand. This is the καιρός (what is proper for the occasion): to know the καιρός is the task of rhetoric. This also is, in my opinion, what Parmenides' epistemology eventually implies. If Gorgias had been Parmenides' son, unlike Plato he would not have felt the need to kill his father.
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