

On the Change of Immutable Being

Evaluating interpretations of Parmenides

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*Histories of early Greek Philosophy
generally attempt to make what occurred
among the thinkers of this era more
intelligible by organizing the period's
intellectual developments within a certain
narrative structure.*

John Palmer, Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy

*Chaos is found in greatest abundance
wherever order is being sought. It always
defeats order, because it is better organized.*

Terry Pratchett, Interesting Times

I hereby declare and assure that I, Cornelis Tom Meijer, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works – including electronic media – have been identified and the sources clearly stated.

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In this thesis, I look into the relation between the logical part and the cosmological part of Parmenides' poem. Their relation is problematic because halfway the poem, the Goddess who narrates it declared that the part about truth is now over and that the second part will now be told in a deceptive manner. Many scholars have interpreted this deceptiveness differently, and the Stanford Encyclopedia classifies five types of interpretations. In this thesis, I critically discuss one exemplar from each group. Afterwards, the merits and complications of each interpretation will be made explicit in a diagram. At the end of the thesis, I conclude that scholars should place more emphasis on the cosmological part.

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Introduction

A long time ago in the city of Elea there lived a man. He was celebrated for creating optimal laws for this city. He knew the Pythagorean school, but did not become a follower. He studied with Xenophanes, but did not adopt his doctrine. Instead, he created his own philosophy and made it public by writing a single poem. Thus, he created his own philosophical school. One of his pupils even became famous merely for defending his master's philosophy through the use of paradoxes. The extraordinary founder of this philosophical school is still known far and wide by the name: Parmenides.

Parmenides of Elea is still known today because he wrote a notoriously obscure poem about 2500 years ago. The perceived obscurity may partially explain the myriad of modern interpretations on many different elements of the poem. If contemporary scholars agree on one issue regarding Parmenides, it is on his preeminent position as a philosopher prior to Socrates. Many a commentator has given Parmenides a central role within the greater narrative of early Greek philosophy¹. No wonder then, that, while writing an interpretation of Parmenides' poem, John Palmer devotes his very first chapter solely to Parmenides' place within the various contemporary histories of early Greek philosophy.² On my view, Palmer is more than justified to do so.

The poem's obscurity is first and foremost due to a schism introduced by its narrator. Although the prologue starts in a first-person perspective, soon a Goddess is introduced who then narrates the body of the poem. At the end of the prologue she states that 'you', presumably either the reader or Parmenides, will learn both the truth and the opinions of mortals. Moreover, having spoken in detail about Being, she suddenly declares to stop her argument regarding truth. Instead, she asks us to learn mortal opinions now, "By listening to the deceptive arrangement of my words."³ Indeed, the shift in the poem is unmistakable, even to the uninitiated reader. Since antiquity, scholars have therefore divided the poem into three parts; a prologue, a logical, and a cosmological part. I will often refer to these parts as the prologue, the first and the second part.

Outline of the Thesis

This thesis will deal with the question 'What is the relation between the first part and the second part of Parmenides' poem?' This relation is problematic because halfway in the poem the Goddess who narrates it says that the part about truth is now over and that the second part will now be told in a deceptive manner. This

¹ The first sentence of the first page in W. K. C. Guthrie: *A History of Greek Philosophy, Volume II: The Presocratic tradition from Parmenides to Democritus*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). reads: 'Presocratic philosophy is divided into two halves by the name of Parmenides'.

² John Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-50.

³ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy, Volume V: Western Greek Thinkers, Part 2*, ed. and trans. André Laks, and Glenn W. Most, Loeb Classical Library 528 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 49.

statement leads many scholars to think that there is no truth to the second part at all. If that is correct, we may wonder why Parmenides bothered to write his cosmology at all. This outcome already shows the importance of the relation between the two parts, since contemporary scholars often dismiss the second part altogether. Through this thesis I will examine the arguments of contemporary scholars on Parmenides and conclude that the second part of Parmenides' poem should be studied as well.

G. E. L. Owen starts his essay on Parmenides by stating that the core problem with Parmenides is "whether [...] Parmenides wrote his poem in the broad tradition of Ionian and Italian cosmology."⁴ In other words, Owen wonders whether Parmenides was in line with his predecessors or whether he breaks with them. This issue is mainly important for the overarching narrative of ancient Greek philosophy. We should not, however, start with this question. We should first focus on the extant fragments of Parmenides and afterwards conclude on Parmenides' relation to earlier philosophers. For this reason, this thesis does not focus on the question whether Parmenides continues or breaks with his predecessors, although it will be discussed in brief.

The first core issue that we are concerned with is the status of the first part of the poem. Certainly, we must know the status of both the first part and the second part before we can determine the relation between these two parts. We will investigate the first part by concentrating on three questions: what is meant with 'Being', what is meant with 'Being is', and how many roads are there for thought. Whereas most contemporary scholars agree on the general status of the first part, there is much contention on these three questions.

Our second core issue will be the status of the second part of the poem. Because there is much less concord between scholars on this issue, the questions on which we concentrate are more general. Again, we will focus on three questions: what is the error of the mortals, how true is the second part, and does the perceived world exist. The answers to these questions will show in what way the second part must be seen as deceptive. In turn, when we know both the status of the first part and the status of the second part, we can understand the relation between these two parts.

The goal of the first chapter of this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, following Palmer's example, it will be used to provide a background to the non-specialist reader. Accordingly, it will deal with both the life and the work of Parmenides. On the other hand, I will introduce the main fragments in a way that will be supported by most, if not all, scholars. In this way, the first chapter functions as a touchstone whereby the reader can judge particular interpretations. If one knows many of the problems of the poem, then one can better apprehend newly arising problems where other problems are being solved.

The second chapter will go into six interpretations of Parmenides' poem. These interpretations are made by: Aristotle, Owen, Guthrie, Barnes, Curd and Palmer, and they are picked for three reasons. Firstly, they are all, Barnes excluded,

⁴ G.E.L. Owen, "Eleatic Questions," *The Classical Quarterly* 10, no. 1-2 (May 1960): 84, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838800024423>.

exemplars of the five types of interpretations as categorized by John Palmer in the Stanford Encyclopedia⁵. Secondly, they often directly respond to the readings of their predecessors, which ensures that they are part of the same debate. And thirdly, by considering these scholars in chronological order, the progression of the debate on Parmenides becomes apparent to the reader.

Barnes is not used as an exemplar, but he is still included for two reasons. On the one hand he fills the temporal gap between 1965 and 1998. It would be misleading to suggest that the debate on Parmenides stagnated during this period. On the other hand, Barnes functions as the perfect transition from Owen and Guthrie to Curd and Palmer, by writing against Parmenides as a real monist. Concurrently, because of the purely negative nature of his argument, he will not be treated in the same way as the other five scholars.

Of these six interpretations, Owen, Guthrie, Barnes, Curd and Palmer clearly show the debate of the 20th century. Aristotle, however, may appear to be a curious choice in the list. Aristotle is included in this thesis because he was both the first scholar that gave a methodical interpretation of Parmenides and because he has been of considerable influence to later interpretations as well.⁶ Furthermore, Aristotle is often referred to by later scholars. It is no coincidence, then, that his interpretation is categorized as a distinct type of reading.

The third chapter will be used to evaluate the readings of the second chapter. All readings, except those of Aristotle and Barnes, will be put into a diagram, so that the reader can look back on the key points of the different interpretations at a glance and see the progression of the contemporary debate. Aristotle is not included in the diagram, because he is not part of the contemporary debate and he does not answer the same questions that the contemporary scholars answer. Neither is Barnes included in the diagram, because Barnes's essay has a purely negative program. After the diagram is discussed, a suggestion will be made in order to improve future readings. Said differently: this chapter will describe the problems of the different readings and observe whether there is something to be gained for future interpretations. At the end of the chapter a conclusion will be given regarding the whole of the thesis.

The value of this thesis mainly resides in two factors. On the one hand, it functions as a clarification of the current debate on Parmenides. It summarizes both the most important problems of the Parmenides debate as well as the solutions offered by the five readings. On the other hand, this thesis can be said to have a more critical outset than the Stanford Encyclopedia article on Parmenides. Whereas the Stanford Encyclopedia article is written by Palmer, who has also developed the most recent type of reading, this thesis will inquire into the different readings to an equal degree.

⁵ John Palmer, "Parmenides," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016), ed. Edward N. Zalta: 3. Some Principal Types of Interpretation, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/parmenides>.

⁶ For more on the value of Aristotle for our knowledge of Parmenides, see: Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Thought*, 3-8.

Problems with the Sources

Only fragments of Parmenides' philosophical poem have survived to this day. Most contemporary scholars estimate that the 154 extant lines constitute almost the whole of the first part and only a little of the second part.⁷ Sadly there were no printing presses around at the time, so every document had to be meticulously copied by hand; a practise that leaves room for error. Furthermore, slowly the Greek language changed and sometimes old words were written down in new ways. Consequently, there is no guarantee that even the 154 extant lines are precisely the same as those that Parmenides once wrote down.

Although some ancient Greek authors are still known because we found ancient papyrus fragments of their work, Parmenides' poem came to us in a different way. For his poem we are indebted to a variety of ancient scholars who summarized and quoted parts of the poem. One result is that most extant lines are complete, but concurrently we cannot be sure of the arrangement of the fragments. Some contemporary scholars use a different order of fragments than others, which can sometimes shift the meaning of the text. Although this thesis will not go into the philological problems in depth, philological issues produce philosophical difficulties, which is why it is important to keep them in the back of your mind.

Lastly, of many of the scholars to whom we are indebted, we must at the same time be suspicious. The reason is that many of these scholars had their own philosophical agendas. In chapter two we will see the prime example of Aristotle appropriating earlier philosophers for his own teleological system. Furthermore, sometimes two sources are in conflict with each other. Concerning Parmenides' year of birth we could, for example, rely on Plato and place it around 515 BCE, or we could follow Diogenes Laërtius and place his birth around 540 BCE.

For these reasons it is very important to use guidelines by which to test our interpretations of ancient Greek texts. Any interpretation on Parmenides should therefore take both the first and the second part into account and it must not explain one of the two away. It must also explain the relation between the first part about truth and the second part about mortal notions. In addition, it should describe Parmenides either as a continuation or as a reaction against earlier philosophers. And lastly, the interpretation must be as coherent as possible and be wary of attributing anachronisms to ancient Greek philosophers.

Naturally, Parmenides might have created an unintelligible poem on purpose. Any meaning that scholars look for may have never occurred to Parmenides. For that reason, every interpretation will strive to be probable, but they will never reach certainty. Still, historians should try to make the most sense of historical texts independently and in the broader context of other historical authors. In this way we may gain some insight into the way philosophy itself developed over time.

⁷ See for example Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy*, 4, and Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Thought*, 350.

Choices of Style and Choices of Content

One could draw from a large number of sources in order to gain understanding of Parmenides. After Hermann Diels's and Walther Kranz's hugely influential philological work *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* was published in 1951⁸, Parmenides became increasingly popular to historians of philosophy. One need only glance over the sources in the Stanford Encyclopedia on Parmenides to see over a hundred works written after Diels's and Kranz's monumental work. For this reason, one can endlessly read contemporary literature on ancient Greek philosophy in general and on Parmenides in particular.

Furthermore, one could also pick works from many different authors from over 2000 years ago to acquire insight into Parmenides. Of Plato and Aristotle many works are still relatively complete and both authors refer explicitly to Parmenides. There are also many ancient historians who, in elucidating Aristotle for example, paraphrase parts of Parmenides. And last but not least, one could read pre-Socratic philosophers like Xenophanes, Heraclitus and Empedocles to understand where Parmenides came from or how others reacted to him.

There are two reasons for limiting our number of sources. The first reason is a reason of content. Not everything that has been said about Parmenides is relevant when we look into the relation between the two parts of the poem. For that reason we may skip i.a. Melissus and Plato because they are only concerned with the logical part of the poem and we may skip Anaxagoras and Empedocles because they were only concerned with the cosmological part of the poem.⁹ If we leave out all scholars that merely write about one of the two parts, we still have an astounding number of scholars to read, which brings us to the second limiting reason: the reason of scope. After all, the aim here is to write a thesis, not a tome. For these two reasons five interpretations were selected to investigate the relation between the two parts of the poem.

All quotes from Parmenides used in this thesis come from the Loeb edition with translations by André Laks and Glenn W. Most¹⁰ for two reasons. Firstly, during the writing process of this thesis, their edition is the most recent translation there is. Secondly, both Laks and Most are philosophers as well as philologists, their translation transcends the division between philology and philosophy. Markings within quoted parts are placed there by Laks and Most.

Furthermore, the way of referring to Parmenides in both notes and bibliography is based on the Chicago Manual of Style, article 14.251. The translation of Laks and Most is a modern edition of a classical text, which means that it is possible that their Greek text differs from the text used by other scholars.

⁸ Hermann Diels published the first version already in 1903 and Walther Kranz ultimately revised it in 1951. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* is a collection of quotes and paraphrases on pre-Socratic philosophers. Indeed, the term 'pre-Socratic' did not yet exist until Diels used it.

⁹ See Jaap Mansfeld, "Parmenides from right to left," *Études Platoniciennes* 12, (2015): paragraph 2, <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesplatoniciennes.699>, and see Barnes, *Parmenides and the Eleatic One*, 4, for more arguments against using Zeno and Melissus when interpreting Parmenides.

¹⁰ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy, Volume V: Western Greek Thinkers, Part 2*, ed. and trans. André Laks, and Glenn W. Most, Loeb Classical Library 528 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 3-151.

For the sake of consistency, this way of referring is also used for Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

Throughout the thesis the words 'path', 'road' and 'way' are used extensively. Although they are all translations of the Greek words 'ὁδός', 'πάτος' and 'κέλευθος', different scholars prefer different combinations. Laks and Most, for example, translate 'ὁδός' usually with 'road', but sometimes also with 'way' or with 'path'. It may be useful to keep in mind that the English word 'way' can also be used to denote the method of an action: 'a way of doing things'. Considering that scholars have personal reasons to prefer one word over the other, this thesis will take over their respective terminologies when dealing with their interpretations. When we are not dealing with other readings the three terms will be used interchangeably.

Chapter I: On Problems in Parmenides

In this chapter I will say something about the life of Parmenides, his work, and the concomitant problems of interpretation. This should give the less informed reader enough background information to understand the second chapter. Additionally, it should let the reader understand any new problems that arise from the way scholars solve problems of interpretations.

The Life and Work of Parmenides

Parmenides, the son of Pyres, was a well-known figure and he was born in Elea. Although the ruins of Elea are located in current southern Italy, back then the area was colonized by Greeks who called it Μεγάλη Ἑλλάς: Great Greece. Parmenides must have had good relations with Elea, because he is said to have created optimal laws for the city. The year of his birth is uncertain, but it is estimated to be either around 540 BCE or around 515 BCE, depending on which source we believe. The precise year is not of much importance to us, but it can be helpful to remember that Parmenides must have been active during the fifth century BCE.

Concerning his philosophical background, we are told that Parmenides studied under the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes, who also wrote in verse. Besides Xenophanes, Parmenides also associated with a Pythagorean called Ameinias, but not much is known about this figure. In turn, Parmenides was the teacher of Zeno, who lived in Elea as well, and the two of them are said to have been lovers. Lastly, Empedocles is said to have studied with Parmenides, but later to have become Parmenides' rival.

Parmenides wrote in verse and he is said to have written only a single poem. Parmenides starts his poem in first-person perspective and he recounts how he travelled in a chariot to 'the Goddess'. The Goddess then speaks to Parmenides and her speech makes up the body of the poem. The Goddess first speaks in detail of the characteristics of Being, that this Being is one and whole and of the impossibility of change. Later in the poem she tells us of the opinions of mortals and of the way the sun and the earth came into being. She even tells us that there are two principles: fire and night. Reading this, one is more than justified to be confused.

We still have about 160 lines of Parmenides' Poem divided over 19 fragments. The poem in its original state is estimated to have consisted of roughly 800 lines. In other words, we only have less than a quarter of the text left. One could argue that this is enough to understand the poem, because everything we still have are the important parts. It would only make sense for later philosophers and doxographers¹¹ to copy the parts that they thought were important. To this one may reply that these parts aren't the important parts of the text, they are merely the parts that the philosophers and doxographers found interesting themselves. In that case we are stuck with a very biased account of Parmenides' work. Although

¹¹ A doxographer is someone who writes down (γράφειν) the opinions (δόξα) of multiple philosophers usually on a single subject.

Problems of Interpretation

Presently, I will explain the main issues so that any confusion about the poem will get a proper place. This does not mean that the confusion will dissipate entirely. It merely means that we will gain insight into the origins of this confusion. Understanding the main issues and why they are confusing will help us understand chapter two, where contemporary scholars try to solve these issues by interpreting the textual fragments in various ways.

The main issues are based on four fragments: fragments one, two, six and eight. The issues involve the number of roads, the nature of the error of the mortals, and the status of the cosmological part of the poem. These issues are not separate from each other. The way one issue is interpreted may cause problems for other issues. Here, we will limit ourselves to explaining the issues, leaving the various ways of interpretation to chapter two.

In fragment one, the Goddess tells us that we must learn everything.

It is necessary that you learn everything,
Both the unshakeable heart of well-convincing truth
And the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true belief.
But nonetheless you will learn this too, how opinions
Would have to be acceptable, forever penetrating all things.¹²

It is clear that learning everything consists of two elements. On the one hand there is the well-convincing truth, and on the other hand there are the opinions of mortals. Even though there is no true belief in these opinions, they are still somehow acceptable and they penetrate all things.

In fragment two, the Goddess tells us about the paths of inquiry:

What are the only roads of investigation for thought:
The one, that “is,” and that it is not possible that “is not,”
Is the path of conviction, for it accompanies truth;
The other, that “is not,” and that it is necessary that “is not”-
I show you that it is a path that cannot be inquired into at all.¹³

Again, there seem to be two roads of investigation. On the one hand there is the way of ‘is’ and on the other hand, there is the way of ‘is not’. The first path is the path of conviction, which echoes the well-convincing truth of the first fragment. If the first part of the first fragment aligns with the first path of the sixth fragment, we may suppose that the second part of both fragments align as well. If that is indeed the case, then the path of ‘is not’ would lead us to the opinions of the mortals. It would be strange, however, that this path cannot be inquired into at all, but that it would still lead to acceptable opinions of mortals.

In fragment six, the Goddess cautions us against thinking along the wrong way.

¹² Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 36-37.

¹³ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 38-39.

It is necessary to say and to think that this is being; for it is possible that it is,
While nothing is not: that is exactly what I bid you to meditate.
For such is the first road of investigation from which <I keep> you <away>,
But then also from this one, which mortals who know nothing
Invent, two-headed [scil. creatures]!¹⁴

The first sentence aligns with the road of 'is' which leads to conviction. The second sentence may refer to the way of 'is not'. This would make sense, because inquiring along the way of 'is not' is said to be impossible. For this reason, with the third sentence she keeps us away from the road of 'is not'. Curiously, it seems that the Goddess then introduces a third way in the fourth sentence. Mortals know nothing of this third way. It might be that this way is therefore the way of the mortals in which there is no true belief. Knowing nothing and not having true belief are then the same for Parmenides. We have thus arrived at a problem. If we accept that there is a third way, we will have to explain which way that is and how it relates to the other two ways. If we do not accept that there is a third way, we will have to explain what Parmenides means with this fragment.

In fragment eight, the Goddess ends the first part and starts the second part.

At this point, for you I stop the argument worthy of belief and the thought
About truth; from here on learn mortal opinions
By listening to the deceptive arrangement of my words.
For they have established two forms to name their views,
Of which the one is not necessary –in this they wander in error–¹⁵

Until now, the Goddess seems to have spoken about the way of 'is' that is about conviction and accompanies truth. From now on, the Goddess will speak about the opinions of mortals. This fragment seems to echo the duality of fragment one, where we were told to learn both the truth and the opinions.

No third road is mentioned in fragment one and fragment eight. The Goddess stated that the road of 'is not' could not be inquired into at all. If we have to learn everything, we do not have to make an impossible inquiry. And for that reason, the first part may deal with the truth and the second part may deal with the opinions of mortals, while no part makes an impossible inquiry. Hence the naming of the parts: the first part is often called the logical part, and the second part is often called the cosmological part.

The Goddess told us in fragment two that there are two roads of inquiry. If we think that there are three roads in total, then the road of the mortals must neither be the road of 'is', nor the road of 'is not'. The road of the mortals would then not be a road of inquiry. For this reason, many scholars believe that the error of the mortals lies in creating this third road. The mortals are, after all, said to invent things.

In fragment six the mortals are called two-headed. Furthermore, in fragment eight, the mortals are said to establish two forms to name their views. Combine the

¹⁴ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 40-41.

¹⁵ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 50-51.

two assertions about the mortals with the two roads of inquiry and we can reasonably conclude that the error of the mortals lies in inquiring after both ways. Consequently, the mortals inquire after the road of 'is not'.

Finally, there remains one large problem. The Goddess first calls the opinions of mortals acceptable and penetrating all things, but later she stops her argument worthy of belief and then we have to listen to the deceptive arrangement of her words. The acceptability of the cosmological part seems incompatible with the deceptive way of stating it. This problem has proved the most arduous for the different scholars to solve.

Chapter II: On Solutions to Problems

In this chapter I will expound on six scholars who have suggested different interpretations of Parmenides' poem. The list of scholars consists of: Aristotle, Owen, Guthrie, Barnes, Curd and Palmer. Each of these scholars will be dealt with in two parts: a descriptive and a critical part. In the descriptive part, I will merely portray the essentials of the view that is being discussed. In the critical part, I will assess the view by noting whether the view has solved the problematic aspects of the poem and whether it has or has not created new problems in doing so. Furthermore, by dealing with the different scholars in chronological order, an attempt is made to make the progression of the debate more apparent to the reader.

Throughout this chapter, I will sometimes refer to the orthodox view. With this term I refer to Aristotle's view of Parmenides as one of the first exhaustive interpretations of the poem. This term is borrowed from contemporary scholars, who use it in order to show which parts of their readings are novel and which are orthodox. Guthrie, for example, is rather orthodox in his views, while Palmer, on the other hand, breaks with many of the orthodox standpoints.

Note, however, that although I will list some of the problems that come with Aristotle's interpretation of Parmenides, I do not criticize Aristotle in the same way as I criticize the contemporary scholars. Aristotle was one of the first to thoroughly and explicitly summarize and interpret his predecessors and although there are points in his work that justify criticism, that is not the issue here. Treating Aristotle as one would treat a contemporary philosopher would easily lead to anachronisms. In this thesis the problems of Aristotle's interpretation of Parmenides are mainly relevant for our understanding of the extant fragments of Parmenides' work. Furthermore, Aristotle's interpretation may show the possible origin for many different modern problems and solutions in the Parmenides debate.

Aristotle: The Aspectual Reading

First it is important to note that Aristotle mainly wrote about his predecessors in two different books: *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. Aristotle did not write these books at the same time, so there may be development in his ideas. For this reason, there may be some discrepancies between these two books, so they would have to be treated separately. Fortunately, on Aristotle's discussion of Parmenides, Palmer wrote in the Stanford Encyclopedia that: "The only point where Aristotle's representation of Parmenides in *Metaphysics* 1.5 appears to differ from the major treatment in *Physics* 1.2-3 is [...] only a superficial difference."¹⁶ Following Palmer, I will assume a unitarian view on Aristotle's interpretation of Parmenides and discuss it as an unproblematic whole.

Aristotle's interpretation of Parmenides in the *Metaphysics* is preceded by his interpretation of even earlier philosophers.¹⁷ In his search for the first principle, Aristotle tries to find out which of the philosophers found which of the causes.

¹⁶ Palmer, "Parmenides," 3.4 The Aspectual Interpretation Prevailing in Antiquity.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Redennick, Loeb Classical Library 271 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 18-23.

Among the first philosophers were the natural monists such as Thales, Anaximenes and Heraclitus, who believed that the first principles were respectively, water, air and fire. Since these natural monists started thinking about the origins of the world in terms of matter, Aristotle believed them to have found the material cause only. With only matter, however, nothing is able to change or move. Wood, for example, does not change itself into a bed, nor does stone make itself into a statue. Therefore, in order to better describe the origins of the world, we would need another cause to make that change happen: the efficient cause.

According to Aristotle, the first philosopher to have found this efficient cause is Parmenides and although he found it, he still maintained that everything is one. For Aristotle this means that Parmenides established that things can only change if there is an external cause for change. But at the same time, Parmenides refused that this external cause could exist. We will use a metaphor for clarification. Think of the way a painting is made: needless to say you would need paint, which would be the material cause of a painting. But you also need someone to move the paint about and thereby create the painting. The one who moves the paint, the painter, would then be called the efficient cause of the painting. Without a moving cause, all we would have is a bucket of paint and that simply is not enough.

For Parmenides there is only Being, by reason of which nothing can change. In our example this would mean that for Parmenides there is only paint in the world. Parmenides was thereby forced to conclude that everything is unmovable and unchangeable. So although Parmenides found out that paint cannot move or change itself, he also thought that no painters exist in this world. Aristotle calls Parmenides one of a kind for this precise reason. Parmenides was the only monist who found the moving cause, “and him only in so far as he admits, in a sense, not one cause only but two.”¹⁸ In sum, Parmenides was the first one who found this efficient cause, and also the only one who still held that there was only one principle: Being. Furthermore, his claim that there is only Being still often causes Parmenides to be seen as a monist.

In the *Metaphysics* I.v. Aristotle continues his discussion of Parmenides as one of the three who said that everything is one unity, even though the other two, Melissus and Xenophanes, are disregarded right away, because their views were too crude. Now, Aristotle writes that Parmenides came to the idea that the whole of Being is a unity, by holding that Non-Being is nothing and therefore Being must be everything. Even so, Aristotle continues:

being compelled to accord with phenomena, and assuming that Being is one in definition but many in respect of sensation, he posits in his turn two causes, i.e. two first principles, Hot and Cold; or in other words, Fire and Earth. Of these he ranks Hot under Being and the other under Not-Being.¹⁹

Aristotle hence attributes to Parmenides the views that all is one, namely Being, but concurrently that there are two causes, namely Hot and Cold or Fire and Earth of

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 24-25.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 38-39.

which one is Being and the other Not-Being. Or, said differently: Aristotle says on the one hand that for Parmenides there is only paint, but, on the other hand, because we see paintings everywhere, that there must be two causes, which he then calls Hot and Cold or Fire and Earth. To understand this turn of events we will have to look into the second part of Parmenides' poem.

By accounting for two causes, Aristotle recognized the two different parts of Parmenides' poem. The first part is where Parmenides writes that Being is one in definition and the second part is where he writes that there are actually two causes. Explained in other terms: the first part deals with Being in definition and the second part deals with Being for sensation. If we merge Aristotle's interpretation with the paint example, we should say that to Parmenides there is only paint, but because we somehow see paintings getting painted all over the place there must both be paint and painters for our sensation. Somehow, we must therefore concede that there are two causes instead of just one.

The important point here is that both parts of the poem deal with Being. One could even say that both parts of the poem are about two different aspects of Being; one by logic and one by sensation. This may also explain why this line of interpretation is called the aspectual reading. If indeed both parts of the poem are about two aspects of Being, then one might even say that on Aristotle's reading, both parts of the poem would deal with the truth. Aristotle himself is hesitant though, for according to him, the first part was about Being in truth and the second part was also about being, but only by appearance. Although the first part is absolutely more truthful than the second part, the precise truth value of the second part remains uncertain.

In the *Physics*, Aristotle criticizes Parmenides by writing that both Parmenides' assumption as well as his inferences are false.²⁰ On the one hand, Parmenides falsely assumes Being to have only a single meaning, while in fact, Being can be used to note either what something is or that something is. On the other hand the inference that Being must be one, because everything is Being, is false. Aristotle gives an example for clarification: if everything is white, it may still be possible that there are multiple white things and therefore there is no unity of Being. He adds that it is probably because Parmenides could not distinguish between the subject and its attributes, the thing that is white and white as a colour, that made him err in his thinking.

We can therefore conclude that Aristotle took Parmenides to mean that everything is Being. Being is not merely an attribute of something, but everything is identical to Being and therefore everything is one. In other words, Parmenides is held to use Being both as what something is as well as that something is. Furthermore, because Parmenides found out that change requires an external cause, he believed that there could be no coming-into-being or other forms of change by definition. Be that as it may, Hot and Cold or Fire and Earth are then conceded to be two different causes, because the phenomena show us that for sensation there actually is change.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. P. H. Wicksteed, and F. M. Cornford, Loeb Classical Library 228 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957) 28-39.

Now that we have seen Aristotle's interpretation of Parmenides, we must remain careful not to accept it at face value. Although Aristotle is closer to Parmenides than we are in terms of temporal distance, this does not necessarily mean that Aristotle had a superior understanding of Parmenides. To give an example, Aristotle describes the earliest philosophers until Empedocles as follows:

They are like untrained soldiers in a battle, who rush about and often strike good blows, but without science; in the same way these thinkers do not seem to understand their own statements, since it is clear that on the whole they seldom or never apply them.²¹

The crucial point here is that Aristotle claims that he understands the statements of his predecessors better than his predecessors understood themselves. Aristotle justifies his purported superiority by holding that his predecessors were essentially searching for the same things as he is: the four causes. The important difference being that his predecessors tried their best, but that only Aristotle found all four causes. In sum, Aristotle knows what his predecessors were trying to do and he has succeeded where they did not, which allegedly gives him superior insight into the aims and the methods of his predecessors. Both the method that Aristotle uses and his belief of knowing his predecessors better than they knew themselves, do not attribute much objectivity to Aristotle.

Furthermore, Aristotle's interpretation of Parmenides gives rise to a myriad of questions. Why would Parmenides have been compelled by the phenomena to posit two causes? Why does Aristotle call the causes hot and cold or fire and earth, while in Parmenides we find fire and night? If there can only be Being, does that mean that the change we perceive is wholly false or is there some measure of truth to be found there? If indeed there is no truth to the second part of the poem, why would Parmenides bother to write it down at all? Or if there is some truth to the second part, what does truth mean for it and how is it deceptive? We will see that these and more questions will be answered by the readings other scholars have proposed. That is not to say that no new problems will come up: every reading has both its merits and its drawbacks.

Owen (1960): The logical-dialectical reading

According to Owen, the core problem of Parmenides is whether his philosophy is in line with his predecessors or whether he breaks with them.²² In the years prior to Parmenides there were a number of different thinkers who are now often labelled as the 'material monists'. These physical monists all thought that the whole of reality was made up out of one or other physical substance. They mainly differed from each other regarding the exact nature of this physical substance. For this reason, scholars have often interpreted Parmenides as a material monist, i.e. a philosopher who thought that the whole of reality was made up of 'Being'. According to Owen, they base this assertion on two premises: firstly that there is

²¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 28-29.

²² G.E.L. Owen, "Eleatic Questions," *The Classical Quarterly* 10, no. 1-2 (May 1960): 84, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838800024423>.

some measure of truth to Parmenides' cosmogony and secondly that the first part of the poem is a logical preparation for the second part. The second premise is in turn based on the view that Parmenides is merely working out the implications of the same One Being his predecessors talked about. Per contra, Owen believes all these assertions to be false. He offers multiple arguments of which I shall present the most important ones.

The main argument against the first premise is based on the Goddess' own description of the cosmology. Owen quotes Parmenides in ancient Greek and he does not offer an English translation himself. Translated the quote section of fragment one reads:

It is necessary that you learn everything
Both the unshakeable heart of well-convincing truth
And the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true belief.
But nonetheless you will learn this too: how opinions
Would have to be acceptable, forever penetrating all things.²³

Considering that, by the Goddess' own words, the second part of the poem is based on the opinions of mortals, it seems quite clear to Owen, that there cannot be any truth to the second part of the poem. Concluding the problem with this would be too blunt however, because we must then wonder why the opinions would still have to be acceptable.

While Owen dedicates a considerable part of his essay to this problem, for our purpose it is enough to explain the concluding argument. The first step of this argument lies in accepting, *pace* the orthodox view, that 'this', in the fourth line of the quote, refers to the opinions of mortals. According to the orthodox view, the last part of the quote shows how the Goddess claims some matter of truth or acceptability for these opinions. She calls the opinions of the mortals acceptable and penetrating all things, so it seems that there is at least a grain of truth to be found in these opinions. Contra the orthodox view, Owen believes the last part of the quote to belong to the content of the opinions of mortals. In other words, while there is no truth to the opinions of mortals, and therefore neither to the second part of the poem, the mortals themselves believe that their opinions would have to be acceptable.

Having refuted the first premise of his opponents, Owen continues by arguing that Parmenides did not start from the same point as his predecessors. This frequently occurring misunderstanding is based on the lines where the Goddess distinguishes the right way of inquiry from the wrong way. Owen again only quotes the Greek; but translated to English the four lines of fragment two read:

The one, that "is," and that it is not possible that "is not,"
Is the path of conviction, for it accompanies truth;
The other, that "is not," and that it is necessary that "is not"-
I show you that it is a path that cannot be inquired into at all.²⁴

²³ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 36-37.

²⁴ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 38-39.

Many contemporary scholars believe that the subject of 'is' and 'is not' is the One Being of earlier cosmologists. Owen takes issue with this view, because Parmenides would then assume that which he sets out to prove i.e. that there exists a single being. Owen counters this interpretation by arguing that whatever 'is', is neither assumed to exist nor assumed to be a unity. Instead of assuming them and thereby creating a tautology or a circular argument, Parmenides must be seen to argue for both these characteristics.

Owen starts his counterargument by stating that the purpose of the quoted text above is well-known, namely to distinguish the right way of investigation from the two wrong ways.²⁵ Peculiar to Owen then, these three ways present all the possible answers to the question whether something exists or not. The right way would always answer yes, the first wrong way would always answer no, and the second wrong way would sometimes answer yes and sometimes answer no. Although no one would say that nothing exists at all, which means that nobody follows the first wrong path, the mortals wander in thought by saying that some things exist and some things do not. According to Owen, Parmenides' argument against this wrong path is that the mortals regard Being and Non-Being as both equal and not equal. The mortals differentiate between Being and Non-Being by saying that some things exist and that other things do not, but at the same time they treat Being and Non-Being the same, because in speaking about them they characterize both. Yet whatever we can talk about must exist, therefore Parmenides concludes that there can only be Being.

Secondly Owen shows that Parmenides does not assume, but argues that whatever 'is' is a unity. For this point it may be useful to have a closer look at the Greek of fragment eight that Owen is talking about:

οὐδὲ διαιρετόν ἐστιν, ἐπεὶ πᾶν ἐστιν ὁμοῖον·
Nor is it divisible, since as a whole it is similar,²⁶

Owen argues the philological point that the Greek word 'ὁμοῖον', which Owen translates with 'homogeneous', should not be read as predicative, but as adverbial. Parmenides would not say 'it is wholly homogeneous', but he would say 'it is in a homogeneous way'. 'Homogeneous' first described the subject of the sentence, but on Owen's reading it describes the verb of the sentence. In this way, Parmenides would not simply assume that Being is one and single, but he would state that it must exist and therefore it cannot start existing or ceasing to exist, and similarly it cannot exist more over here than over there. As a conclusion, Being must exist "unqualifiedly, without intermission"²⁷ which, of course, makes it an indivisible unity.

Now Owen has shown that the subject of 'it is' in the quoted text is neither Being, nor the One Being which his predecessors spoke of. The third option is to

²⁵ Although only one wrong way is described in fragment two, the second wrong way is introduced in fragment six.

²⁶ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 46-47.

²⁷ Owen, "Eleatic Questions," 93.

maintain that there is no subject, such as in 'it's warm outside'. But Owen is not convinced by this option either, because Parmenides tries to prove the attributes of this subject and it would make no sense to prove attributes of *S* when there is no *S*. Instead of these three, Owen therefore settles on a fourth option: the subject of that which 'is' and which is an indivisible unity, is that which can be spoken and thought of. If we take that to be the subject, then Parmenides proves that it must exist, because if it did not exist we could not talk and think about it. We *do* talk and think about it (right now), therefore it must exist. Being is that which can be spoken and thought about. We speak and think about *x*, therefore it exists.

One may wonder why Parmenides bothered to write the cosmological part if there is no truth to it anyway. To this problem, Owen answers that the second part must have been purely dialectical. The cosmology is the account of the world with which his opponents would counter Parmenides by saying: 'No, Parmenides, *this* is the way the world works'. Any account, however, requires two elements and a constant process of change; both of which Parmenides has proved to be impossible. Therefore, there is no possible way to give a description of the whole of reality to counter Parmenides. Read in this way, the most important part of the poem is the first part, while the second part is merely there as an exclamation mark.

We can thereby conclude that according to Owen a) the second part of the poem has no truth to it, and b) the content of the first part of the poem is not derived from the earlier cosmologists. The reason for Parmenides to still write the cosmological part of the poem must, according to Owen, be purely dialectical. Therefore Parmenides does not start by assuming material monism and, moreover, he demolishes any possible cosmogony. In consequence, Owen's answer to the initial question 'is Parmenides in line with his predecessors' is that he irrevocably breaks with them.

The first issue with Owen's argument for the existence of Being is that it seems to be a circular argument. Owen has formulated it thus:

What is declared to exist in B 2 is simply what can be talked or thought about; for the proof of its existence is that, if it did not exist, it could not be talked or thought about. And it needs no proving that the subject of the argument can be talked and thought about, for we are talking and thinking about it²⁸

Owen starts with the dichotomy between Being and Non-Being; either something exists, or it does not. The subject of Parmenides' Being must then be what can be talked and thought about. This idea is based on fragment three, which, in its entirety, reads: "For it is the same, to think and also to be."²⁹ If the subject would not exist, we would not be able to speak or think about it. But we can be sure that we *can* speak and think about it, because we are doing so at this very moment. As a result, we have proven that what can be spoken and thought of exists, without the need to assume Being at the start. In consequence, Owen's choice of words made it look circular, but upon further analysis the argument is actually valid.

²⁸ Owen, "Eleatic Questions," 95.

²⁹ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 38-39.

The second issue with Owen's reading is that the purely dialectical nature of the second part of the poem is rather improbable. If Parmenides has already proved that there cannot be change, then it would be redundant to still describe the world in terms of change. Furthermore, if one part of the poem is dialectical, one would expect a transposition of the two parts of the poem, so that the dialectical part would be first. After all, one normally first depicts the opposition in order to debunk them straight after. First giving your own argument and presenting your adversaries at the end seems awkward at best.

Guthrie (1965): The monist interpretation

There is a single important point at the core of Guthrie's reading of Parmenides. It is the idea that the poem as a whole is about the real and the seeming; truth and falsehood. The first part of the poem then deals with logical truth. It argues, for example, that there can be no motion, no time, and no change. In contrast, the second part of the poem deals with the way the world seems to the mortals. It reveals to us that in our daily world there seems to be motion, change and time, even though this is impossible, as Parmenides has shown in the first part. Guthrie's reading is relatively in line with Aristotle's and it is rather intuitive and straightforward. Be that as it may, it creates a number of issues as well. The most significant issue is why Parmenides even bothers to write a cosmology when he has already proved that it is impossible. Presently, I will make an effort to describe the line of argument and list its implications.

On the subject of 'what is', Guthrie commends Owen for his argument, but still disagrees. Instead, Guthrie believes the subject to be 'Being', which would indeed make it a tautology: Being is. Although Owen argued against the tautology on account of Parmenides arguing for Being instead of assuming it, and how could one argue for a tautology, Guthrie remarks that Parmenides had good reason to explicitly state this tautology. All the earlier physical monists did not notice the implications of this tautology, namely that nothing can change if there is only one substance. Therefore, Parmenides stated this tautology to show people the inevitability of the consequences of Being; that nothing can change whatsoever. Guthrie agrees with Owen that 'what can be spoken and thought about' is a correct description of 'what is', but that does not mean that Parmenides did not argue from a tautology.

Guthrie reads Parmenides as saying that the first road is the road of Being and the second road the road of Non-Being. The first is right and proper to think of and the second one should be avoided. In fragment six the Goddess tells us to stay away from the second road...:

But then also from this one, which mortals who know nothing
Invent, two-headed [scil. creatures]! For the helplessness in their
Breasts directs their wandering thought; and they are borne along,
Deaf and likewise blind, stupefied, tribes undecided [or: without judgement],
Who suppose that "this is and is not" [or: that to be and not to be] is the same

And not the same, and that of all things [or: for all] the path is backward turning.³⁰

Here it seems that the Goddess introduces a third road, even though she said that there were only two roads for thought in fragment two. For Guthrie this is not a problem. The third road, he argues, is just the mortals' mistake of mixing up the first road with the second. The mortals think that the road of Being is the same road as the road of Non-Being and therefore wander in thought.

About the mortals naming two forms of which it is not right to name one, Guthrie argues that we should only name Being. The two forms are named fire and night by the mortals, which Aristotle connected to fire and earth; which he identified with Being and Non-Being. Guthrie deviates from the Aristotelian path, in so far as he does recognize an analogy, but denies that these terms should be identified with each other. Instead, Guthrie argues that the one form that should be named "is in fact neither of the two that mortals do name [...] The initial mistake lies in naming two forms at all."³¹ In other words, we should not distinguish anything from anything else, because everything is essentially one single homogeneous unity.

On Guthrie's reading, the first part of the poem thus deals with Being as a single unity and it entails thinking along the road of truth by means of judging by reason. Non-Being does not have its own part, because it is impossible, and the Goddess keeps Parmenides away from this way of thinking. The second part of the poem then deals with Being as split up into two forms, which is the error of the mortals and this part entails thinking along the way of seeming by means of trusting the senses. The conclusion, according to Guthrie, is:

That if reality is eternal and is one, then it could never have become the starting-point (arche) of a manifold world. But its eternity and its unity must be accepted. Just as 'what is', had it been generated, would have to come out of what is not, so would any other being; and this is impossible. [...] This does away with any idea of a living and growing universe, such as both Milesians and Pythagoreans had described.³²

Parmenides therefore breaks with his Milesian predecessors. The earlier natural philosophers argued that everything came to be out of one element, be that water, air, or the boundless. Parmenides, however, while accepting the premise that there can only be one Being, refuted their conclusion that everything came to be by this one element. Instead, Parmenides was the first to notice that no change is possible when there is only one principle, whichever that principle might be.

One of the main problems that this monist reading runs into is why the second part exists at all. If Parmenides has shown that no change can exist whatsoever, why does he still continue to sketch a traditional cosmology? Guthrie attempts to solve this problem by arguing that Parmenides does his best for the

³⁰ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 40-41.

³¹ W. K. C. Guthrie: *A History of Greek Philosophy, Volume II: The Presocratic tradition from Parmenides to Democritus*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 54.

³² Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 30.

perceived world. Even though change does not exist, we still perceive change in our daily lives. Even if change does not exist and if everyone is convinced that it does not, we still have to eat, sleep and work. According to Guthrie, then, Parmenides gives us the most accurate description of the perceived world. In spite of all Parmenides' original insights, Guthrie states about the way of seeming: " 'But if it is unreal, what is the point of trying to give an account of it at all?' is to put a question that is not likely to have occurred to him."³³

In sum, Guthrie believes that Parmenides started from a tautology, that Being is, and showed that this results in a single, homogeneous, unchanging Being. Non-Being is not, but because it is impossible to speak or think about it, Non-Being is left aside. The mortals mix up these two roads of understanding and thereby create a new road: the road of seeming. The road of seeming is then extensively described in the cosmological part of the poem and Parmenides did not wonder why he would so extensively describe something if it is untrue anyway. The reason for Parmenides to write the poem on the whole, is essentially to break with the natural philosophers before him.

A few problems remain in place. One example is presented by Palmer in the Stanford Encyclopedia. There he states:

One problem with Guthrie's view of Parmenides is that the supposition that Parmenides' strict monism was developed as a critical *reduction* of Milesian material monism sits uncomfortably with the notion that he actually embraced the wildly counter-intuitive metaphysical position.³⁴

In other words, Parmenides is seen both as a critic of the material monists before him, but at the same time he borrows the very same assumption; that the whole world must be derived from a single substance viz. Being. If Parmenides is seen as a critic of Milesian monism, one would expect Parmenides to abolish monism as a whole and assume two types of Being, so that he can create his own cosmology. Instead, he develops his own monism and he writes a cosmology that cannot be true. Indeed, it is quite the understatement to call this element of Guthrie's interpretation counter-intuitive.

Furthermore, Guthrie's defence of the value of the cosmological part is rather weak. He argues against Owen's solution, who supposed that the second part is purely dialectical, by noting that "it seems an unlikely and unwise procedure"³⁵ for convincing people of the validity of the first part. Furthermore, he admits that the road of seeming is untrue, but states that there are still better and worse versions of an untrue worldview for Parmenides. Guthrie here makes the analogy with a dream: "Everything in a dream is equally unreal, but anyone who has dreamed knows that some dream-elements are more *like* reality than others."³⁶ So just like dreams can be more or less like reality, there are descriptions of the perceived world that are more

³³ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 52.

³⁴ Palmer, "Parmenides," 3.2 The Logical-Dialectical Interpretation.

³⁵ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 71.

³⁶ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 75.

or less like the truth. In that sense, there is good reason to give the most real description of the perceived world possible.

Nonetheless, the analogy is not elucidated enough: for we are not told in what way the perceived world is like Being. The problems with the perceived world include both change and a duality of principles, but in what way can a description be more like the truth? Would a worldview be better if there is the least amount of change, or when it admits only two principles instead of many? Furthermore, even if one could give satisfactory answers to these questions, it would still remain unclear why this would make the second part of the poem valuable. Even if there are better and worse descriptions of the world of seeming, this still would not result in convincing truth. Or to put it in Guthrie's own terms: even if some dreams are more like reality than others, we still could not learn anything about reality by dreaming about it.

Barnes (1982): against real monism

Owen and Guthrie on the one hand and Patricia Curd on the other, are connected through Jonathan Barnes. While the timeline in the list of content may imply otherwise, plenty has happened in the Parmenides debate between 1965 and 1998. Although we will not go into this period too deeply, it does pay to take special note of Jonathan Barnes, because he wrote an essay against Parmenidean monism in 1982. With this essay he countered the interpretations of both Owen and Guthrie, while simultaneously opening up the way for new interpretations such as those of Curd and Palmer. Because Barnes did not create his own type of interpretation, the lines devoted to him will be fewer than to the other scholars. Presently three of Barnes's core argument will be summarized in short.

The focus of Barnes' essay is on refuting the idea that Parmenides was a real monist. Barnes contrasts real monism with material monism. Whereas real monism entails believing in the existence of only a single entity, material monism entails believing that everything is essentially made of a single matter. In this sense, Parmenides' predecessors were material monists, but not necessarily real monists. The aim of Barnes is not to establish that Parmenides was a pluralist, but that monism and pluralism did not matter to Parmenides. This objective is the foundation for the negative approach used by Barnes. In order to prove that monism did not matter to Parmenides, one must show that he did not purposely argue for it.

Barnes starts by noting that one should not use Zeno or Melissus to prove that Parmenides was a monist. Although Zeno attacked pluralism, that does not make him a defender of monism. After all, some of his arguments attack both pluralism and monism alike. And even if we accept Zeno to have defended monism indirectly by attacking pluralism, to conclude that Parmenides too must have defended monism goes too far for Barnes. Likewise, Melissus is often held to repeat Parmenides; his only contribution to it being mistakes. Barnes, however, interprets Melissus very differently. On his view, Melissus created a new argument, and indeed in furtherance of monism. But if his argument is not inherited from Parmenides, why should the conclusion? Parmenides might still have been a monist of course, but such a claim cannot be constructed exclusively from Zeno and or Melissus.

The first argument given by Barnes's adversaries is based on the following four lines from fragment eight:

This is the same: to think and the thought that "is."
For without what is, in which it [scil. thinking] is spoken,
You will not find thinking. For nothing else <either> is or will be
Besides what is,³⁷

Although Barnes suspects a high degree of corruption to this text, he believes that the general idea of this part can still be understood. According to his adversaries the general argument goes as follows: Being is whole and without motion and therefore there is no Being apart from Being. Everything must exist: if something would exist here and something would exist five metres from here, then the distance in between would have to exist as well. Our thoughts must also be part of this great pile of Being, so everything we think of must also be part of Being. Therefore, it is the same to think and to think that something exists. And for that reason any language that implies that something does not exist is wrong.

Barnes counters by noting that even if we follow this construction of the argument, then there is still no need to attribute real monism to Parmenides. The argument shows that whatever one thinks of must exist. This does not imply real monism for Parmenides in any way. In this manner, Barnes does not refute the argument of his opponents, but he merely notes that their conclusion does not follow from their argument. This type of reasoning is typical of Barnes's essay and this argument clearly illustrates his strategy for arguing against real monism.

The second argument is very different and is based on the following lines of fragment eight:

For they have established two forms to name their views,
Of which the one is not necessary –in this they wander in error-³⁸

This part of the text lends itself to multiple interpretations. Some scholars have interpreted these lines as saying that the mortals named two forms and they should only have named one. In that sense, the error of the mortals is pluralism and the way of truth would indeed entail monism. Barnes does not offer a conclusive counter argument, instead he offers an alternative interpretation. His reading takes these lines to say that the mortals picked two forms, but that they should not have picked forms at all. According to Barnes the error of the mortals is therefore not pluralism, and consequently they need not be monists.

As an auxiliary argument, Barnes writes that the forms that have been named by the mortals should be seen as forms of matter, not unlike the different types of matter the material monists spoke about. Along these lines, Parmenides would be arguing that the mortals think, for example, that everything is fire and night, while there is actually only fire. This way he would be arguing specifically

³⁷ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 46-49.

³⁸ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 50-51.

against material pluralism, which is not the same as real pluralism. Therefore, if one claims Parmenides to be a monist on the basis of this fragment, one only claims him to be a material monist. Material monism means that everything is made of the same stuff, so there may still be multiple objects made from that single stuff. Accordingly, there is still no proof that Parmenides believed in the exclusive existence of one, single, homogeneous, everlasting, immutable entity.

According to Barnes, some scholars believe that Parmenides did not argue for monism, simply because he presupposed it³⁹. The subject of that which is whole, single, motionless, and without beginning or end would then be The One. Barnes, however, finds this absurd. He wonders:

how could he [Parmenides] have taken as a first, unargued posit a proposition of such gigantic and unprecedented implausibility? Again, how could he have expected his audience to grasp that his whole argumentation rested upon such an axiom? or, having grasped it, to refrain from ridicule and ribaldry?⁴⁰

Clearly, Barnes has a hard time believing this suggestion. In that sense he agrees with Owen, albeit on very different grounds.

In sum, Barnes has argued that Parmenides might be seen as a material monist, but that this does not make him a real monist. Furthermore, Parmenides offers us the principles that something must adhere to in order to exist. More specifically, anything that can be talked or thought of must exist, and in that way Parmenides portrays the necessary characteristics of every existing thing. Neither did Parmenides presuppose monism. Barnes concludes:

if it is not true that he [Parmenides] believed that only one thing existed, it does not follow that it is true that he believed that not only one thing existed. As far as we know, the question of how many items the universe contains did not concern him.⁴¹

If we look closely enough at the way of truth, we still find insufficient evidence to call Parmenides a monist or an anti-monist. Why the second part of the poem deals with a pluralistic cosmology and whether there is any truth to it is another question, one on which Barnes does not dwell in this essay.

Curd (1998): Predicational Monism

Patricia Curd is convinced by Barnes's argument against real monism in Parmenides. Barnes's real monism entails there existing only a single thing, so this is called numerical monism by Curd. Curd's Monism, on the other hand, means that for anything to be genuinely, it must have the attributes described in the logical part. So it must be one, homogeneous, unchanging and so forth. This does not mean,

³⁹ Barnes here refers to F.M. Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides: Parmenides' way of truth and Plato's Parmenides*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1939), 29-35.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Barnes, "Parmenides and the Eleatic One," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 61, no. 1 (1979): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1515/agph.1979.61.1.1>.

⁴¹ Barnes, "Parmenides and the Eleatic One," 20-21.

however, that there must exist precisely one such object in the world. In other words: on Curd's view there may be a lot of things that are monistic.

In order to explain what Curd means with genuine existence and the implications this interpretation brings, we should first know Parmenides' program. According to Curd:

Parmenides was interested both in the criteria for a proper account of what-is – that is, the fundamental entity or entities in an account of nature of the *kosmos* – as well as in the metaphysical requirement any such entity must meet.”⁴²

So Parmenides wanted to know both what the principles of Being are and how we can know them. In the next paragraphs I will expound on the arguments Curd makes for her interpretation of Parmenides.

The first step is the claim that Parmenides does not argue for the impossibility of speaking and thinking about Non-Being; he just asserts it. The Goddess states the impossibility of speaking of the way of Non-Being multiple times, and Curd quotes one instance from fragment eight to give an example of the absence of an argument. Translated by Laks and Most the example reads:

The decision on these matters depends upon this:
“Is” or “is not”? Well, it has been decided, as is necessary,
To abandon the one [scil. Road] as unthinkable, unnameable (for it is not
The true road), and [scil. Deciding] thereby that the other by consequence,
exists and is real.⁴³

This example shows the Goddess declaring that either ‘is’ or ‘is not’. Because the road of ‘is not’ is no true road, this road must be unthinkable. By exclusion, the road of ‘is’ must then exist and it must be real. Comparable to this example, the Goddess never argues for the impossibility of Non-Being.

If one interprets Being as existential, as scholars have done until Curd, then Parmenides would be taken to say that one cannot think or speak about that which does not exist. According to Curd, Parmenides would thus make a very controversial claim.⁴⁴ Although making controversial claims is not problematic by itself, one would expect Parmenides to argue for such claims. Furthermore, *pace* Owen⁴⁵, Curd has just established that no argument is being made concerning Non-Being. Whereas Owen merely acknowledged the problem, Curd maintains that we should try to interpret the claim as non-controversial. Accordingly, we should not construe Being as existential, but as predicative.

That the ‘is’ should be seen as predicative means that it denotes *what* something is instead of *that* something is. For that reason, according to Curd, when

⁴² Patricia Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides: Eleatic Monism and Later Presocratic Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 67.

⁴³ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 44-45.

⁴⁴ Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides*, 29, 33, 34.

⁴⁵ Owen, “Eleatic Questions,” 94.

we know Being, we know precisely what it is. This changes our interpretation of the poem to a large extent. Now Parmenides is taken to say that everything is *F*, instead of saying that everything must exist. The question Parmenides answers thus changes from 'does it exist?' to 'what is it?' The way of Being then tells us what it is, and the way of non-Being tells us what it is not. The second way would, according to Parmenides, not help us any further, so we should focus on the first way.

The merit of this interpretation is that Parmenides' predicational claim continues to be revolutionary, while at the same time it is not as controversial as the existential claim. To give an example: if we would say that Medusa must exist then we make a strange claim, but if we would say that Medusa is whatever Medusa is then our claim sounds a lot more acceptable. In this way, then, the problem of Parmenides not arguing for his claim is addressed. This line of interpretation alters the solutions offered to many smaller problems, but in doing so it may create some new problems too.

Before we continue to the error of the mortals let us first examine Curd's Monism. We should not just regard 'is' as predicational, we should also consider it as monistic. When Parmenides writes about the different characteristics of Being, Curd interprets them as the principles to which any genuine thing must adhere. In other words: if we say that something genuinely is, it must be *F*. It does not matter *what* that thing is precisely, anything must at least always be *F* if it is to exist genuinely. This *F*, then, cannot change; so *F* as a predicate is monistic. For that reason, Curd calls her line of interpretation predicational monism.

Since Parmenides argues that change cannot exist, something that is *F* can never change into something that is *G*. Because if *F* becomes *G*, then it will not be *F* anymore. But Parmenides has proven that something that is, cannot cease to be. For this reason, Curd interprets Parmenides as rejecting change in general. In addition, Curd writes: "Should it be *F*, it is all and only *F* with no possibility that it can also be *G*. For if it were such a plurality, it could be scattered in thought into its *F* and *G* components."⁴⁶ The nature of a genuine thing must therefore be both single and unchanging.

Now that the meaning of Being has shifted, the way we know Being shifts as well. The first of these shifts is the notion that there are only two routes of enquiry instead of three. Curd translates lines 28 to 30 of fragment B1 as:

[...] It is right that you should learn all things
both the unshaken heart of well-persuasive truth
and the beliefs of mortals, in which there is no true trust.⁴⁷

Here we see clearly that the Goddess promises to teach us everything, which is divided into only two ways. Curd gives multiple examples to show that there are only two roads, but for the sake of conciseness we will limit ourselves to one

⁴⁶ Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides*, 68.

⁴⁷ Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides*, 25.

example. Curd continues by stating that most other interpretations simply ignore the fact that Parmenides only writes about two roads.

According to Curd, the belief of contemporary scholars that there are three roads is solely based on fragment B6. Although the translation indeed seems to show a third road, Curd has reason to believe the Greek should be altered. The origin of this problem is that the Greek sentence has not survived completely and ends prematurely. There are multiple ways to finish this sentence, while only one leads to the interpretation of three roads. Curd presents multiple arguments to alter the Greek, but we need not delve into the Greek text ourselves. Curd's main argument, after all, is that it is relatively easy to fix the problem of the Greek text, but that the interpretation of three roads does not align with the rest of the poem at all, and that it should therefore be avoided.

The error of the mortals can on this interpretation not be the third road anymore, so their error must now be part of the road of non-Being. In fragment 8 we have seen the Goddess declare that either is or is not. In other words: there is Being and there is non-Being, there is no in-between. Based on these lines, Curd writes that "any hint of what-is-not in an account of what a thing really is disqualifies the account, for it is one that was reached via the negative route and so is not a genuine account at all."⁴⁸ The error of the mortals thus consists of believing to give a genuine account of things while they actually give an account based on the way of non-Being.

As briefly noted before, the way of Being entails judging by reason what a thing is. Fragment eight consists of a list of principles to which anything must adhere in order to be a genuine thing. We could say that this list describes the content of the aforementioned *F*. Parmenides writes:

There only remains the word of the path [scil. that says]:

"Is." On this one there are signs,

Very many of them: that being, it [or: that what is] is ungenerated, indestructible,

Complete, single-born, untrembling and unending [scil. probably: in time].

And was not, nor will it be at some time, since it is now, together, whole,

One, continuous. For what birth could you seek for it?⁴⁹

The nature of a genuine thing is accordingly: ungenerated, indestructible, complete etc. The mortals introduce principles such as change and coming-to-be when seeking the genuine nature of a thing. Still, they believe to be on the right path towards true knowledge. That belief, however, is the error of the mortals.

Now that the Goddess has told us of the way of Being, she continues to the second part of the poem. Before telling us about the opinions of the mortals, she first warns us of the deceptive arrangement of her words. Soon after she introduces two principles: Fire and Night. According to Curd, this cosmology is deceptive because it is easy to believe. It is persuasive on the grounds that Fire and Night appear to be genuine and independent entities. In reality, however, they are each

⁴⁸ Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides*, 59.

⁴⁹ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 41-45.

other exclusions. The existence of one consists of the non-existence of the other. Curd calls this ‘enantiomorphic’: two sides of the same coin. Since Parmenides has shown that there can be no non-Being, these enantiomorphic principles cannot genuinely exist.

The Goddess describes the error of the mortals in fragment eight as follows:

For they have established two forms to name their views,
Of which the one is not necessary –in this they wander in error-⁵⁰

According to Curd, they should not have named both Light and Night. However, only naming one of them would not have solved the problem. Precisely because these two principles are enantiomorphic, it is simply wrong to only name one of them. The true error of the mortals is therefore the positing of enantiomorphs in general. After all, any genuine existing thing must be one and whole in description, while enantiomorphs require each other for the description of their nature.

Although this specific cosmology may be false, Curd refuses to believe that there cannot be a true cosmology at all. After all, Parmenides never states that cosmologies are impossible. For that reason, Curd believes that the second part of the poem functions as a model for future cosmologies. She writes: “If only Light and Night were genuine entities rather than interdefined opposites, Parmenides’ cosmology would give an account of the world as experienced”⁵¹. So on Curd’s account, Parmenides came very close to writing a genuine cosmology, and with the principles of part one, a genuine cosmology may be imminent.

In sum, Curd has changed ‘is’ from existential to predicative and she has interpreted the principles of fragment eight as those to which anything must adhere in order to genuinely exist. The mortals mistakenly believe that they think along the way of truth, while they introduce coming-to-be and change. For that reason, the mortals are actually on the way of non-Being. They have postulated enantiomorphic principles and therefore their cosmology seems true, while in truth it is false. The reason for Parmenides to still write this untrue part, is to serve as a model for future cosmologies.

Curd has made strong arguments for her interpretation while keeping her English accessible. She made good points against the interpretation of Parmenides as a material and numerical monist. Furthermore, she convincingly contended for her predicational monism. Still, there are two issues with her discussion of the second part of the poem. Firstly, she simply assumes that the principles of Light and Night are opposites. Although most, if not all, scholars agree with her, this is not argued for. If it would happen that Light and Night are not enantiomorphs, then, according to her own words, the second part of the poem *would* be true. Consequently, a great deal depends on a notion that is not argued for.

Secondly, the notion that the second part is untrue continues to sit uneasily with the rest of the reading. Curd claims that the second part is useful because it can be used as a model for future cosmologies. I do not see how an untrue cosmology

⁵⁰ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 50-51.

⁵¹ Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides*, 116.

can help other cosmologies. After all, we already have the principles of fragment eight. If we make sure that our cosmology is in line with those principles, we will have succeeded in giving a genuine cosmology without needing to even read the second part of the poem.

Finally, it should be noted that Curd's predicational monism distinctly resembles Plato's ideas. Being on Curd's interpretation and Plato's ideas are both ultimately singular in description. They are both unending and unchanging. They are both infinitely independent from anything in the world. Remarkably enough, Curd does not make the resemblance explicit. For this reason the reader is explicitly cautioned not to equate the way Plato's ideas exist with the way Being exists for Parmenides.

Palmer (2009): The modal reading.

Although Palmer does not make it explicit, he seems to have taken over Curd's idea that 'is' should be read as predicative. He added that 'is' should be viewed as existential at the same time. In the end, all his additions converge and they can be boiled down to one core idea: Parmenides distinguished between the modalities of necessity, impossibility and contingency. Presently, we will have a closer look at the most important views that Palmer holds, so that we can fully appreciate the strength and novelty of his interpretation.

The first of Palmer's suggestions is about the multiple ways as described by the Goddess in fragment two. Most scholars interpret fragment two as pertaining to two ways, one for Being and one for Non-Being, with the addition of a third way in fragment six. Palmer is no exception to this tendency, but he does change the content of some of these roads. The translation of fragment two by Most and Laks goes:

What are the only roads of investigation for thought:
The one, that "is," and that it is not possible that "is not,"
Is the path of conviction, for it accompanies truth;
The other, that "is not," and that it is necessary that "is not"-
I show you that it is a path that cannot be inquired into at all.⁵²

Clearly, the Goddess claims that there are two ways for thinking in fragment two: one way that is and the other way that is not. Although Palmer agrees on that point, he differs from other scholars by observing one very important point: that *both* ways are for thinking.

The first road is the road of conviction that accompanies truth. The road itself should not be called the road of truth, for it only follows truth. Furthermore, if one does not want to partake in an anachronism, of which Owen is here accused, it is important to note that truth here should be read as 'true reality' instead of 'true idea'. The Goddess never calls her narrative true or the opinions of the mortals false, but instead merely calls them reliable and unreliable.

⁵² Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 38-39.

The second road must then be the unreal road. This is not to say that it is not a road at all, it is merely a road that deals with the impossible; necessary non-Being. On the one hand, this road is the formal alternative to the road of necessary Being, but on the other hand, the Goddess keeps Parmenides away from this road of investigation. The reason for the Goddess to keep Parmenides away from this road for thought is summed up by Palmer:

What one will never discover, however, is any such thing as an actual round square, so that from Parmenides' somewhat archaic perspective it [is] appropriate to describe the second way as one along which nothing may be discovered.⁵³

Again, according to Palmer, Parmenides is not concerned with 'truth', but with the 'real'. On that reading, Parmenides does not hold that one cannot understand anything when thinking about the impossible, instead he holds that one cannot discover anything that is impossible, simply because it is impossible and therefore cannot exist. Indeed, how could one wish to discover that which is not there?

If the second road is the unreal road, which does not allow us to discover anything, then why is it spoken of at all? Why would the Goddess describe the second road, only to warn us not to travel it? According to Palmer, the second road is described merely because it is the formal alternative to the first road. This road does not let you wander in thought, because the impossible is just like the necessary in that it is timeless, motionless, continuous, etc. This road can therefore be said to be a straight road for thought, although one would not discover anything when travelling this road. For this reason the road is described, but should not be travelled on.

Palmer's third way comes into view in fragments six and seven. The most important parts of these two fragments read:

It is necessary to say and to think that this is being; for it is possible that it is,
While nothing is not: that is exactly what I bid you to meditate.
For such is the first road of investigation from which <I keep> you <away>,
But then also from this one, which mortals who know nothing
Invent, two-headed [scil. Creatures]!⁵⁴

For never at all could you master this: that things that are not are.
But as for you, keep your thought away from this road of investigation
And do not let much-experienced [or: much experiencing] habit force you
down onto this road,⁵⁵

Translated thus, it seems that in the first line, the first road is the road of necessary Being and that in the second line, the second road is the road of impossible Non-

⁵³ John Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 101.

⁵⁴ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 40-41.

⁵⁵ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 42-43.

Being. Moreover, the Goddess proclaims that the mortals wander two-headed in thought on a third road and that Parmenides should restrain his understanding from this road. Palmer interprets the roads of fragment two as the roads of necessary Being and impossible non-Being. The road of fragments six and seven must then be seen as the road of contingency. This would indeed make sense, for the two-headedness of the mortals lends itself intuitively to interpreting the mortals as not properly differentiating between the first and the second road.

The Goddess states in fragment six that the mortals “suppose that “this is and is not” [or: that to be and not to be] is the same And not the same, and that of all things [or: for all] the path is backward-turning.”⁵⁶ Palmer interprets this third way as a circular way, one that returns back to itself. It is impermanent, wandering and contingent. When one strays from the first path, the path of Being, then one wanders in thought. Palmer gives the example of our apprehension of the moon:

When the moon changes from full to waning, one’s prior apprehension of it as full must likewise alter and thus proves not to have been trustworthy or reliable. Not only is one’s apprehension unstable and as mutable as its objects, but, what is worse, it can seem to change to non-apprehension.⁵⁷

This is the case for any entity that changes in time. If the object changes, so must our understanding of it. This means that such objects are not proper objects for understanding that does not wander. In other words, we should only let our understanding deal with objects as described by the first part of the poem i.e. ones that are necessary, eternal and immutable. This is also the reason why this road is not a road for understanding: simply because this road does not lead one to understanding. Wandering roads only lead to wandering understanding, and, if we may believe Palmer: to Parmenides, wandering understanding is no real understanding at all.

That is not to say that nothing can be learned from the third way. To Palmer, it seems that even though the third way does not lead to genuine understanding, there can still be better and worse views of the cosmos. The Goddess herself in fact gives us her version of the cosmology, which, of course, must be the best version possible. The Goddess recounts in fragment eight:

For they have established two forms to name their views,
Of which the one is not necessary –in this they wander in error-
And they have divided their body into opposites and posited signs
Separate from each other: for the one, the ethereal fire of flame,
Being mild, very light in weight, the same as itself everywhere,
And not the same as the other one; and that one too, in itself,
The opposite, night without knowledge [or: without light], a dense and heavy
body.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 40-41.

⁵⁷ Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy*, 117.

⁵⁸ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 50-51.

Furthermore, in fragment nine she says:

But since all things have been named light and night
And what belongs to their powers is assigned to these and to those,
The whole is altogether full of light and of ungleaming night,
Both of them equal, since nothing is amidst either of them.⁵⁹

In her cosmology, the mortals name both light and night as principles of the world. Although many scholars have read this part as saying that the mortals named two forms and should have named only one form, this line of thinking cannot be accepted by Palmer. Indeed this road leads to wandering understanding, but this cosmology cannot be called the best one possible if we could simply fix the cosmology by only naming one form. The mortals do wander in thought because they believe that there are two permanent oppositions: light and night. Nevertheless, using two principles is the only way you can describe the world at all.

The error of the mortals thus lies in believing that light and night are objects for genuine understanding. In other words, while they should only use necessary Being as the object for genuine understanding, they now use variable principles such as light and night. This does not change the fact that this cosmology is the best possible cosmology; it merely means that the mortals are mistaken in thinking that changing objects, objects that come to be and cease to be, are the proper objects for genuine understanding. Neither light nor night can be properly described on their own, they need to be described as opposites, even though their change makes our understanding of them wander. In sum, the mortals try to follow the first way of thought, but because they believe their senses, they become so used to material, changing things, that they wander in thought by not allowing for necessary and changeless Being.

According to Palmer, the main point that Parmenides tries to make in his poem must then be: there can only be genuine understanding if one follows the first way of thought: the way of Being. There can be understanding if one follows the second way of thought, the way of Non-Being, but one would never discover anything real that way. Furthermore, one could learn much by travelling the third way of contingent Being, but one would not gain genuine understanding by travelling that road. The main problem of the mortals does not lie in following this wandering way, but in missing the first way of thought and therefore assuming that genuine thought lies at the end of the wandering third road.

The cosmological part of the poem is on Palmer's reading very much true. While the first part is about necessary Being and its formal counterpart: impossible Non-Being, the cosmological part is about contingent Being. Other scholars have argued that there can only be genuine Being, but in fact Parmenides nowhere claims anything like that. Failure to grasp the idea that contingent Being is not the proper object for genuine understanding has deceived other scholars into believing that there is no truth to the cosmological part of the poem. All in all, on Palmer's reading, all that Parmenides has set forth are the modalities of necessity, impossibility and

⁵⁹ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 56-57.

contingency, together with the admonition not to mix them up. With this, Palmer has succeeded in solving many of the problems that were handed down to him with the reception of Parmenides. Be that as it may, it would be naïve to think that no further progress could be made and that the debate on Parmenides has now ended.

In this way, Palmer has solved the problems that came with the interpretations of his predecessors. One of the reasons that Palmer has solved all these problems, is that he focused on the philosophical coherence of the poem.⁶⁰ This focus has two important effects. On the one hand, it makes sure that Parmenides created a comprehensible philosophy and that there are hardly any problems with it. On the other hand, Palmer's extensive application of the principle of charity also entails that there may be persistent philological problems. Although this thesis does not focus on the philology, it does pay to succinctly consider this issue.

Whereas Parmenides does use the word 'necessary', ἀνάγκη and χρῆ, to describe both Being and non-Being, he nowhere mentions contingent Being. Even though Parmenides did not use this term himself, it may of course still properly describe his ideas. While the philosophical arguments for this interpretation are very strong, philological arguments only argue for it indirectly. Palmer can only show that the extant fragments are in line with his interpretation. He cannot prove that Parmenides considered contingent entities as the object of inquiry for the mortals. The best way for us to test Palmer's reading is therefore trying to falsify it.

Let us again consider the first sentence of fragment six: "It is necessary to say and to think that this is being; for it is possible that it is,"⁶¹ Naturally it would be problematic if every possible Being is necessary Being. This would leave no room for the not-necessary, contingent Being of Palmer's reading. Palmer therefore translates it differently, namely as "It is necessary to say and to think that What Is is; for it is to be,"⁶² In order to decide between the two translations, we must take a look at the Greek ourselves. The Greek of the last part goes: ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι. Although there is no explicit mention of possibility here, the Greek does allow for such a translation. Translated most literally I would translate either with: 'because/for Being is', or: 'because/for it is Being. Laks and Most note in a footnote that the alternative translation 'for being is' is difficult to suppose. They do not, however, note the translation of 'for it is Being', which is almost the same as Palmer's translation. Despite the fact that Laks and Most translate this sentence differently, I see no problems for Palmer. After all, the main problem originates from the use of accents in the Greek word ἔστι, while Parmenides himself did not write with these accents. In sum, although his focus lies on philosophy, Palmer does not neglect the necessary philology, as he has produced a credible translation.

⁶⁰ On page 138 of *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy* Palmer writes, for example, that the strength of his reading is that it avoids "the unnecessary attribution to Parmenides of absurd and unoccupiable positions, among which is certainly to be counted the strict monist thesis that only one thing exists, when there are viable alternatives available."

⁶¹ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 40-41.

⁶² Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy*, 110.

Chapter III: On Further Improvement

The goal of this chapter is threefold. Firstly, it will be used to look back on the most important elements of chapter II. This is done by charting the answers of the discussed scholars of the 20th century to crucial problems of interpretation. Furthermore, in contrast with chapter II, it will focus on the problems instead of on the scholars. Secondly, it will analyse the different readings and suggest a new direction for the debate on Parmenides. Lastly, it will be used to conclude the thesis as a whole.

Recapitulation

The essential features of the interpretations of Owen, Guthrie, Curd and Palmer are put into the table below. This is done by extracting their answers from chapter II to the core questions as described in chapter I. In the leftmost column we find these core questions and every column shows the answers given by a different scholar. The scholars are chronologically ordered from left to right, so that the progress of the debate on a specific question can be seen at a glance.

| Question scholar | Owen | Guthrie | Curd | Palmer |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| What is the subject of 'Being is'? | That what can be spoken and thought of. | That which is, which means that which can be spoken and thought of. | Any real thing: every genuine thing must be a complete being. | Proper, immutable objects of understanding: that which is necessary. |
| How is the verb used in 'Being is'? | Existential, so everything must exist, and nothing does not. | Existential, which explicitly makes this claim a tautology. | Predicative, whatever it is, it must be one and whole etc. in description. | Both existential and predicative. What is necessary must exist and must also be whatever it is. |
| How many roads are there? | Three: everything is, nothing is, some things are and some things are not. | Three: the road of being, the road of non-being and the road of seeming. | Two: the road of Being and the road of Non-Being. | Three: the road of necessity, the road of impossibility and the road of contingency. |
| What is the error of the mortals? | The mortals claim that some things do not exist, while in fact there is only Being. | The mortals think that the road of Being is the same as the Road of non-Being and thereby they walk the road of Seeming. | The mortals mistakenly believe that they gain genuine understanding, while they are in fact on the road of non-Being. | The mortals look at changing objects when searching for genuine understanding, while they should only look at immutable objects. |
| Is the second part true? | No, its use is purely dialectical. | No, but there are still better and worse cosmologies and its use is practical. | No, but it is still useful as a model for future cosmologies. | Yes, but because it deals with changing matters, it leads to wandering understanding. |
| Is the perceived world real? | No, because only a single unchanging thing exists. | No, the perceived world is an illusion. | Yes, but the perceived world causes the error of the mortals. | Yes, but not everything in the perceived world is necessary. |
| Does P build on his predecessors or does he break with them? | P breaks, because he does not assume monism from his predecessors and he proved change to be impossible, thereby ending all Ionian cosmology. | P breaks, because he proved that the Milesian monists were all mistaken. | P continues, because he is concerned with the same problems as his predecessors. | P continues, because he started from monism just like his predecessors. |

The question about the subject in 'Being is' examines the character of Being itself. A different way to pose this question is to ask 'what exactly is Being?' Owen argues that Being is whatever we can speak and think of. All the while, Owen is careful not to make this sentence a tautology. Guthrie agrees with Owen on the nature of Being, but he purposefully does make it into a tautology. Curd narrows the subject down to only genuine entities. While Palmer follows Curd in this description, he adds that there are also entities that are not real or genuine.

The question about the verb in 'Being is' examines what Parmenides says about the subject. These two questions are therefore inseparable. Owen argues for the interpretation that whatever we can speak and think about exists without making it a tautology. Guthrie agrees with Owen on all aspects but one: namely that Parmenides *does* argue from a tautology. Curd's interpretation is completely different. She argues that every genuine thing must be *F*, so her interpretation of 'is' is predicative. *F* stands for the different principles as described by the Goddess in fragment eight. Palmer combines the two previous interpretations by saying that Being must both exist and be whatever it is. Although Parmenides thus conceives of necessary Being, not everything exists in this way; there is also contingent Being.

The number of roads scholars attribute to the poem influences their answer to the error of the mortals. Owen, Guthrie and Palmer all believe there to be three roads in total, while only Curd argues for two roads. To be more specific: Owen holds that the mortals sometimes walk the road of Being and sometimes walk the road of non-Being, thereby creating the third road. Guthrie thinks that the mortals cannot distinguish between the road of Being and the road of non-Being and therefore he concludes the same as Owen, namely that the mortals thereby create the third road. Curd then breaks with this line of interpretation by arguing for an alteration of the Greek text. She thus maintains that there are only the two roads: the road of Being and the road of non-Being. Palmer then returns to the interpretation of the three roads, but he does change the meaning of the roads. According to him, the first road is the road of necessary Being, the second is the road of impossible non-Being and the third road is the road of contingent Being. Note that to both Owen and Guthrie one road was of Being and two were of non-Being, while to Palmer two roads are of Being and one of non-Being.

The error of the mortals must then be regarded in combination with the number of roads. Consider, for example, that Owen, Guthrie and Palmer all argue that the mistake of the mortals lies in them walking the third road. Owen argues that the mortals sometimes walk the road of non-Being and therefore their mistake is creating and thinking along the third road. Guthrie argues that the mortals try to walk the road of Being, but mistakenly they walk the road of non-Being and therefore, again, they create and think along the third road. Although Curd argued for only two roads, she follows this line of interpretation as well. She argues that the mortals think that they are on the road of Being while they are on the road of non-Being. She does not, however, believe that they thereby create a third road. Furthermore, on her account the mistake does not consist in thinking that some things do not exist, but it consists in their way of searching for truth. The mistake of the mortals is thus that they think they can gain genuine understanding by asking what something is not. Palmer combines the previous interpretations by arguing

that the mortals look at the wrong objects when searching for genuine truth. For they search along the road of contingent-Being and thus they look at changing objects, while they can only gain genuine knowledge by searching along the road of necessary-Being by looking at immutable objects.

The status of the cosmological part of the poem received the most divergent answers. Owen believes that it is meant to be purely dialectical and therefore it is entirely untrue. Guthrie also believes it to be untrue, but he still attributes practical value to it. Even though there is no change in the world, the mortals still have to live in this world of seeming and deal with apparent changes. Comparable to Guthrie, Curd also argues that the second part of the poem is untrue and she also attributes practical value to it. Her practical value differs from Guthrie's, because, according to her, the poem can be used as a model for future cosmologies. Palmer is the only scholar who argues that the cosmological part is true. Still, this part can only lead to wandering understanding. Although wandering understanding is not as good as genuine understanding, on Palmer's reading, wandering understanding is still more valuable than no understanding.

A corresponding question is whether the perceived world is real. Owen does not believe so, because there is only one, unchanging and homogeneous Being, while there is change in the perceived world. Guthrie wholeheartedly agrees, and he calls the perceived world the world of seeming. Curd again deviates from her predecessors by arguing that the perceived world is real, even though it causes the error of the mortals. Because the mortals think that the perceived world is all there is, they think that they can gain genuine knowledge from the perceived world. Palmer follows Curd in claiming that the phenomenal world exists. Palmer adds the suggestion that there is both necessary and contingent Being in this world. Impossible non-Being can of course nowhere be found in the world. The mortals just have to make sure they know which kind of Being they inquire into.

The last question is the most important question according to Owen, namely whether Parmenides wrote in the tradition of his predecessors or whether he broke with them. According to Owen, Parmenides breaks with his predecessors, because he does not start from the same premise as the Milesian monists, while he does prove the impossibility of their project. Guthrie also believes that Parmenides breaks with his predecessors, but he differs from Owen by arguing that Parmenides *did* start from the same premise as the Milesian monists, again to prove the impossibility of their project. According to Curd, Parmenides continued the project of his predecessors, because he showed to which principles a cosmology must adhere. On this reading, Parmenides even gave an example of how to write a cosmology. Palmer calls Parmenides a "generous monist"⁶³. Parmenides does argue for monism, but he does not argue against pluralism: he accepted both types of being. For this reason, Palmer views Parmenides as a continuation of the project of his predecessors.

⁶³ Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy*, 46.

Improving Extant Problems

Even though most of his standpoints have been countered by later scholars, Owen has provided us with a valuable reading nonetheless. Presently the remaining problems his reading faces will be made explicit. Firstly, Parmenides' splits the poem into a logical and a cosmological part, but Owen gives no conclusive argument that would make the cosmological part worthless. Secondly, the purely dialectical purpose of the cosmological part discards the second part too easily. It is an interpretation that allows scholars to neglect the second part and thus it is a way to avoid problems instead of solving them. Thirdly, the three roads oppose the dualistic nature of the whole poem. There are, for example, the road of Being and the road of non-Being, the logical part and the cosmological part, the principles of light and night. Still, the notions that the third way consists of the error of the mortals, and that it swerves between the road of Being and the road of non-Being, have been adopted eagerly by other scholars.

Guthrie has altered many aspects of Owen's interpretation while keeping the general idea the same. For this reason, he has the same problem as Owen concerning monistic Being and the illusionary world. The validity of the logical part is made more compelling, because on this reading, Parmenides started from a tautology, which is hard to invalidate. Furthermore, Guthrie recognized Owen's negligence of the cosmological part and tried to improve its worth by arguing that it has practical value for the mortals. Nevertheless, this part remains untrue and the defence is thus rather weak. Why would Parmenides do his best for the world of seeming if it does not exist anyway? If the world of seeming is untrue, it is one thing to still have to live in it, another to have to explain how it works. The cosmology might help mortals understand the world, but knowing that the world is an illusion does not help to live in it. Lastly, Guthrie allows for three ways for thought, just as Owen did, which is opposed to the dualistic nature of the poem.

In many respects, Curd's interpretation entirely parts with the ideas of Owen and Guthrie. Most importantly, she does not regard the world of perception as fundamentally untrue. For this reason, both parts of the poem are concerned with the truth. Although Curd still regards the cosmological part as failing to be genuine, at least Parmenides tried to make it true. The second part thus guides the reader to a better understanding of the world. Be that as it may, the logical part would be enough to guide the reader to a proper cosmology. The cosmological part is now considered as attempting, but failing, to adhere to the principles, which would not help to create a true cosmology. Furthermore, the addition that this cosmology is Parmenides' best attempt does little to increase its utility. Lastly, Curd opts for two roads instead of three, while preserving the idea that the error of the mortals lies in their mixing-up of the two roads. In sum: the only remaining problem is the lasting low value of the cosmological part.

Palmer returned to the notion that there are three roads in Parmenides' poem: the road of necessity, the road of contingency and the road of impossibility. The logical part then deals with necessity and the cosmological part deals with contingency. Since there are no impossible entities in the world, no part deals with the road of non-Being. In this way, Palmer's reading adheres to the dual nature of the poem, even though it allows for three ways of Being. Furthermore, following

Curd, Palmer regards the world of perceptions as true as well. The cosmological part deals with the road of contingent Being and thus leads to wandering knowledge. Palmer slightly alters his predecessor's interpretation that the error of the mortals consists of mixing up the two roads of Being. On his reading, this means that the mortals look at contingent, changing entities, while they believe to gain genuine knowledge. In this way, Palmer has solved the philosophical problems of preceding interpretations of Parmenides.

Although not necessarily ruining, there are three weaknesses to Palmer's interpretation. The first and the second are methodological and the third is historical. Firstly, because he lacks textual evidence for contingent-Being, Palmer cannot offer proof for this reading, as he can only show that his interpretation does not contradict the text. Secondly, alternative interpretations may be just as true as Palmer's. There may be different ways of interpreting Parmenides while having the precise same problems and solutions to textual issues as Palmer. If multiple readings are just as probable, we are still stuck with not knowing what Parmenides tried to achieve. Thirdly, Palmer severely reduces the pivotal position of Parmenides. This deviates from earlier views on Parmenides, but it also affects the historical narrative of pre-Socratic philosophy in general. Still, this is not intrinsically or methodologically problematic. If Palmer can conclusively argue for a new narrative in pre-Socratic thought, then this weakness may even be turned into a strength.

Palmer's reading is very strong, but there may still be stronger possible readings. In order to make an even more persuasive interpretation one should focus more on the cosmological part. Scholars focused almost exclusively on the logical part and the attention has shifted only gradually towards the cosmological part. Palmer was the first to claim that the cosmological part is true and that only its results may be deceptive. Doubtlessly, there are more ways to attribute positive meaning to the second part.

Furthermore, a focus on the cosmological part may result in a more substantiated reading. Considering that the second part of the poem is more open to interpretation, this part is easier to fit into a reading than the first part. For this precise reason, one should try to start with the textual evidence of the second part. The extant lines of the cosmological part are fewer in number than those of the logical part. The cosmological lines should be used as handholds instead of being mostly ignored. One cannot explain the first part away, and if one starts with the second part, neither can the second part be explained away. The result will be a more textually based and therefore a more convincing reading.

Lastly, although Zeno was not used in this thesis, one could make use of his paradoxes in future studies. I agree with Barnes that one should never prioritize Zeno's words over those of Parmenides when searching for understanding of Parmenides. Still, one could use Zeno to see what sort of topics he dealt with and compare those with Parmenides. If Zeno, for example, deals with necessity and contingency in his paradoxes, then Palmer's interpretation becomes much more credible. Furthermore, if Parmenides' fragments prove ambiguous on an issue, then Zeno's text may help to settle a conclusion. In sum: Zeno's texts should be used as auxiliary material.

Conclusion

In the first chapter, we have seen the most important problems in the debate on Parmenides. In the second chapter, the progression of the debate has become apparent and we have found problems with all contemporary interpretations, including Palmer's. In the third chapter, we have seen ways to improve the debate in the future. One could, for example, take Zeno into account and, moreover, focus on the cosmological fragments of the poem.

What, then, is the relation between the first part and the second part of Parmenides' poem? Let us first look at the two parts individually. Every scholar sees the logical part of the poem as true. This notion would be very hard to change, since the Goddess says her argument is worthy of belief and that it is concerned with truth. Every scholar, with the exception of Curd, sees the cosmological part as the result of the error of the mortals. Owen simply calls it untrue, Guthrie calls it seemingly true, Curd calls it Parmenides' attempt of being true, and Palmer calls it contingently true. We can thus see that scholars have tried to interpret the cosmological part as true, but that this is no easy feat.

Interpreting the cosmological part as true makes sense, because Parmenides shows understanding that had not been present until him. To give an example: in fragment fourteen, the Goddess claims that the moon is: A light in the night wandering around the earth, a light from elsewhere⁶⁴ In fragment fifteen, she continues that the moon is: Always gazing towards the rays of the sun⁶⁵. For this reason, Aëtius thought that Parmenides meant that the moon did not have its own light and was instead illuminated by the sun. Here, it does not matter whether Aëtius was correct with this interpretation, what does matter is that such claims should be studied more instead of being dismissed. Moreover, it would be puzzling to accept that Parmenides was the first to make such claims while holding on to the idea that there is no truth in the cosmological part.

The relation between the first part and the second part of the poem is usually thought of as a relation between true principles and a failure to follow these principles. This failure is then identified as the error of the mortals. So the first part of the poem describes the way of Being and the second part of the poem describes how the mortals fail to follow that road. The moral of the story is that the mortals may have failed in following the road of Being, but that does not necessarily make the cosmology untrue. The mortals may still have gained some insight. Most importantly, the deceptiveness of the cosmology must not allow us to dispose of it.

We have thus found that the first part is very much true, and that we should seek truth in the second part as well. Still, we should remember that the cosmological part is deeply related to the error of the mortals. Considering that in fragment eight the Goddess states that she gives a deceptive account of the opinions of the mortals, the challenge for contemporary scholars is to interpret the second part as true, while holding on to the deceptiveness of the Goddess's words.

In the end, Palmer is the one who has best met this challenge, because he solved most of the philosophical problems and has attributed truth to the

⁶⁴ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 66-67.

⁶⁵ Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 66-67.

cosmological part. Be that as it may, even Palmer's reading has weaknesses. Even if we see his line of interpretation as the best there currently is, improvements can still be made. For example, if one would emphasize the extant text, a more credible reading could be constructed. Moreover, by putting the focus on the cosmological part of Parmenides' poem, new light may be shed on old material.

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