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Proceeding on Parmenides’ Path of Persuasion

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Introduction

Parmenides’ perplexing poem has managed to both deeply influence the history of western philosophy and evade consensus on nearly all points of interpretation. One may reasonably suppose that Parmenides wrote obscurely to cause exactly this sort of confusion in the reader. Yet, it seems impossible that his arguments could carry their apparent deductive force if they did not concern something. Many interpreters have claimed that, in contrast to Heraclitus’s fiery theory of flux, Parmenides argued that there exists just one great, unified, and unchanging physical being. Nevertheless, the radical difference between sense presentations of the world and the a priori metaphysics presented by Parmenides’ goddess seem to undermine her claim to honesty. Indeed, as the recognized progenitor of logical philosophical deduction, one would expect Parmenides’ arguments to be (in some sense) true and concerned with truth. Thus, I will defend the view that Parmenides’ poem does not offer a metaphysical account of the one thing that is, but rather an epistemic account of the one method to know the truth.

I will begin by elaborating on the problems of deciphering\(^1\) the philosophical message of Parmenides’ poem. Then I will elucidate the solutions to which my thesis is committed and finally argue for their merits.

At the Gates of Night and Day

Many have found Parmenides’ poem immensely resistive to reasonable interpretation as his verse was replete with ambiguities\(^2\) and his unclear concepts eluded easy reconciliation; however,

\(^{1}\) All translations and line numbering are from McKirahan’s comparatively clear text unless otherwise noted; I suggest keeping a copy on hand (McKirahan, 151-157). References to the original Greek come from Diels (Diels, various pages).
ability to resolve or account for four central difficulties should be the primary method to judge the merits of an interpretation. First, a view must give a clear answer to what Parmenides took his subject to be and how that subject might necessarily have the properties Parmenides attributed to it in fragment 11.8. Indeed, Parmenides’ excruciatingly challenging verse seems intended to force the reader to determine the answer to “What is it?” Second, any interpretation must give a sensible explanation for why Parmenides’ goddess who proclaimed to speak only the indubitable truth also told him the deceitful opinions of mortals in a separate cosmology. What more was she capable of informing Parmenides of after declaring the entire truth?

Third, a caveat, Parmenides’ poem was obviously structured as a series of careful deductive syllogisms, so an interpretation ought to avoid unnecessarily attributing fallacious reasoning to Parmenides and to fit the highly-organized dialectical structure of the poem. Satisfying this condition, however, will be one of my argument’s greatest strengths. Fourth, an interpretation may not be anachronistic; it must explain the historical interactions of Parmenides’ thought with authors immediately before and after him. I conceive of this condition as necessary for a view’s adequacy, but fulfillment does not otherwise make a view superior to others. I will only seek to avoid anachronism here; demonstrating complex relationships between arguments in other ancient texts is well beyond the scope of this paper.

2 Unfortunately, some of the main arguments, such as the one beginning 11.6, are particularly unclear. In a more poetic example of how Parmenides twists words, Mourelatos notes of 11.9 line 4 “By this extremely improbable pun Parmenides manages to say simultaneously: (a) “the moon is a light which is not its own” [i.e. reflected]; (b) “the [round-eyed/round-faced/Cyclopean] Moon is a wandering stranger; (c) “the Face-in-the-Moon is not himself” (Mourelatos, 315).

3 See Owen’s preeminent essay “Eleatic Questions” and Barnes’ The Presocratic Philosophers for insights into the precisely arranged and tightly intertwined arguments of 11.2 – 11.8. Owen’s “dialectical” interpretation was most similar to my own, though he argued that Parmenides’ subject was “What can be spoken and thought of” and maintained that Parmenides’ cosmology was an argumentative device to show that other purportedly true cosmologies were less adequate than his false one (Owen, 85). Since his argument agreed with mine at key points of interpretation, I will frequently compare our theses.
The Proffered Keys

To resolve the poem’s predicaments, my thesis makes the following essential claims. First, Parmenides not only used deductive logic to formulate his argument, his argument was about deductive logic itself. When Parmenides’ goddess promulgated the path of Persuasion, she was not merely telling him what to believe, but how to deduce true beliefs. This claim may seem paradoxical because logic is not generally construed to have spatiotemporal characteristics, but its abstraction is precisely what makes it possible for the principles of logic to be instantiated at all points and times. I will make this argument by sequentially analyzing the arguments in the poem from 11.2 to the shift in 11.8. Since this is the most important claim, the majority of the paper will be devoted to supporting it. Second, I concur with some writers that the goddess’s cosmology of light and darkness describes the mixture of truth and falsehood of human phenomenological experiences. Since thoughts themselves existed for Parmenides, the thoughts composing experience also existed. Infected with falsehood, however, they were never to be trusted. Now, let us “judge by reasoning that much-contested proof.”

On the Subject of Esti

Beginning in 11.2, Parmenides made frequent and ambiguous use of the Greek word ἔστι, or “esti,” the third person singular form of “to be” (McKirahan, 160). Parmenides’ diction was ambiguous since it was neither clear what subjects the verb took, nor clear what sense of the verb he meant. Since understanding the meaning of the much repeated “esti” is critical to understanding the meaning of the poem, I will attempt to clarify both of these ambiguities.

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4 11.7 line 5. As translated and used by Owen (Owen, 101).
5 ἐίναι or “einaí” is the infinitive “to be” and is also frequently used by Parmenides.
Most authors assigned the first ambiguous instances of “esti” and “einaí” (11.2 lines 3 and 5) a metaphysical subject, but I found this interpretation philosophically disadvantageous. In Burnet’s classic translation, line three read “The first [way of inquiry], namely, that It is (esti), and that it is (einaí) impossible for it not to be (einaí).” Guthrie cited four major scholarly positions on what subjects “esti” took: (1) a corporeal entity, “The One Being is,” (2) the subject of 11.6 1, “what can be spoken or thought about is,” (3) the logical tautology “What is, is,” (4) or that “is” was impersonal like saying “it is snowing again” (Guthrie, 14). I agree with Owen that the impersonal interpretation and the tautological interpretation are implausible; Parmenides believed that it was necessary to deductively prove the traits of his subject so he could not have been discussing a mere tautology or something that cannot be assigned traits (Owen, 90-94). Nor do I accept the corporeal interpretation or the objects of thought interpretation; since Parmenides gave these ascriptions later in the poem (if he did at all) and he demonstrated their veracity rather than assuming it. All of these interpretations suffered at least one major difficulty. They required either that Parmenides began his series of careful proofs concerning “It” with a logically senseless or unwarranted assumption about “Its” nature or that Parmenides entirely failed to introduce his main subject before referring to it with an implied pronoun.

On the other hand, I found that assigning the verb “esti” the subject “the first” (referring to the paths of inquiry and specifically the path of Persuasion) in line three was both philosophically pragmatic and linguistically parsimonious. I instead formulated line three as “the one, the path that is and the path that it is not possible not to be.” The path of Persuasion was therefore not concerned with persuading the reader of an extrinsic truth, but its own truth which I believe is the universal validity of logic. My interpretation avoided both difficulties that faced the previous positions since the claimed subject was adequately introduced. Parmenides’ goddess had already stated that she

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6 Burnet gives this as fragment 4 (Burnet, 173).
would tell him the “persuasive truth” and I cannot find a better candidate than the truth of “path of Persuasion” itself. So, on my view, the remainder of the first part of the poem served to defend the necessity of the path’s validity. Further, this choice of subject contextually fit, since the suggested referent of “esti” occurred in the immediately preceding line and pronominally as “the one” in the same line. In a discussion with a Greek speaker, he stated that were fragment 11.2 isolated, his natural choice for the subjects of the verbs was ἡ (ὁδὸς) μὲν or “the first (path).”

In what senses of “is” could that statement be understood? First, Parmenides’ meaning must be construed within the usage context of contemporary Greek language: to denote existence and having properties. McKirahan claims that interpretations of “is” and “to be” ought to assign the terms the same meanings throughout much of the poem. While this is an admirable trait of an interpretation, it cannot reasonably be expected that Parmenides intended to strictly use one meaning throughout; most writers do not typically make such acute distinctions when using “is” and Parmenides made frequent use of double meanings. Crucially, Greek thinkers of Parmenides’ time had not yet distinguished between the existential and predicative form of the verb “to be.” Also, the existential “is” or the “is” of predication imply some veridical sense in the verb’s usage, if X exists or X is Y then it is true that X exists or it is true that X is Y. Thus, consistently attributing any

7 From 11.2 line 2’s ὁδοὶ, the plural of ὁδὸς.
8 Of course the quality of this limited evidence, especially as applied to ancient verse, is debatable. I merely sought to verify my thesis would not fail prima facie.
9 McKirahan claims that there are two desirable traits, consistency and intelligibility, with which to adjudicate between the interpretations that “is” is existential, predicative, both existential and predicative, or veridical (McKirahan, 161). While intelligibility and general consistency are to be desired, it is doubtful that Parmenides’ obscure writing should yield to strict consistency.
10 Also, an interesting footnote to the metaphysics discussions in class: “[I]t is important to understand from the outset that the notion of ‘being’ studied by Parmenides and by early Greek philosophy in general, is not ‘confined’ to either of our two distinct concepts, that of existence and that of being something-or-other in the sense of having such-and-such properties (being a man, being green); rather, these notions are impacted or fused in the early Greek concept of being. A result is that a Greek inquiry ti to on, ‘what is being?’, frequently must be interpreted as concerned simultaneously with the concepts being = existence and of ‘being Φ’ for a variable Φ. To approach a Greek thinker, even as late as Aristotle, without keeping this in mind is to risk serious misunderstanding of his concerns” (Furth, 243).
single meaning of “to be” seems untenably anachronistic, since Parmenides was both not aware of such distinctions and probably had no intention of reifying them if he did.

Next, I claim that there was a veridical sense that Parmenides had in mind since he was developing a theory concerning the nature of truth. In many cases, construing “is” either existentially or fused was adequate and preferable when interpreting the text, but for some cases that strategy was contradictory. Parmenides granted such a broad class of things existence—“For thinking and being are the same”\(^\text{11}\)—that it would be incoherent to attribute inexistence to some things he described. For example, how could it be that the mortal judgment that “to be and not to be are...the same”\(^\text{12}\) is inexistence? As a logical contradiction, the statement is instead always false and hence part of the unlearnable second path.\(^\text{13}\) Moreover, if the unlearnable path and other things that are not have no existence whatsoever, then Parmenides could not possibly refer to them. Owen analogized that Parmenides, like Sextus Empiricus and the Pyrrhonists, climbed a ladder of premises concerning the inexistent and spatiotemporal and discarded it after demonstrating the vacuousness of those concepts (Owen, 100). Yet Parmenides’ goddess declared that she spoke the indubitable truth, so I cannot believe that she began her argument with ultimately false premises. McKirahan denied the veridical reading since the second path would still be intelligible were it true that nothing is true (McKirahan, 162). Contrariwise, if it is true that nothing is true, then the statement “nothing is true” must be false so the veridical interpretation logically necessitates the unintelligibility of the unlearnable path more decisively than other possible interpretations. Finally, since Parmenides was the first to employ deductive logic in philosophy he was in an important sense exploring the very

\(^{11}\) 11.3 line 1. This is the classical interpretation of a particularly difficult line; Burnet’s well-justified translation of the line similarly states “for it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be” (Burnet, 173). See also 11.1 lines 31-32 and 11.6 line 1 for further evidence that Parmenides believed thoughts exist.

\(^{12}\) 11.6 line 9

\(^{13}\) Most sources I read cited mortal knowledge as a third path of inquiry based on the statements of 11.6 lines 4-5. However, Parmenides claimed in 11.2 lines 2-6 that “that the only ways of inquiry are...the one...of Persuasion...[and] the other...unlearnable [way].” So I believe an adequate interpretation must show how the judgments of mortals collapse into the latter path.
meaning of what it is for a statement to be true. Others may have previously claimed to possess
divine and infallible knowledge, but Parmenides methodically built his system from simple
statements that he believed could not be doubted.

What Must Be

The crucial moment in the poem occurs at 11.6 lines 1-3 when the goddess unveiled the
elementary truths. By most accounts, she deduced that the objects of thoughts necessarily exist on
the grounds that it is possible that those objects exist, but nothingness may not possibly exist.
Bertrand Russell summed up the argument best:

“When you think, you think of something; when you use a name, it must be the name of
something. Therefore both thought and language require objects outside themselves.”
(Russell, 49)

Owen, however, claimed that Parmenides’ argument failed before it even left the gate, committing a
crippling modal fallacy.\(^\text{14}\) The error occurred when Parmenides equivocated between the definition
that necessarily nothing is inexistent \(\Box(N \rightarrow \sim E)\) and the claim that nothing necessarily does not
exist \(N \rightarrow \Box(\sim E)\). A charitable reading should attempt to defuse the modal fallacy since there is an
intuitive appeal to the argument, especially as Russell phrased it. By my veridical analysis,
Parmenides possibly intended the following argument to be formed from his unclear lines:

P1. It is only possible for a statement in thought or speech to be true.\(^\text{15}\) (This statement
could be drawn from either 11.6 line 2 or the orphaned fragment 11.4.)

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\(^{14}\) “A, which can exist, is distinguished from B, which (poor thing) cannot: invalid, for to say ‘nothing cannot exist’ is not
to ascribe compulsory non-existence to anything but to say that it is necessarily (truisstically) true that what doesn’t exist
doesn’t exist, and this unexciting reformulation disables the argument. The fallacy is the so-called de re interpretation of
modal statements” (Owen, 94).

\(^{15}\) The word \(\lambda\acute{g}\epsilon\tau\iota\nu\) or “legein,” meaning “to speak,” can additionally be used as “to express a meaning” (Guthrie, 20).
So, writing does not make the cut since its external existence is not always concomitant with the existence of a meaning
within a mind.
P2. It is not possible for nothing to be true. (If nothing were true, then that statement would be false.)

C1. Necessarily, there exist some truths. (Logically equivalent to P2)

C2. Everything that is true exists in speech or thought ("That which is [must be] there to be spoken and thought of \textit{must be.}[^{16}]"

Supposing that my formulation is what Parmenides had intended, there are two immediate conclusions. First, the nihilist belief that there are no true statements must be false. Second, absolute truth exists in the mind and is not a property of the external world. These conclusions match the next lines in 11.6 and 11.7 which disparage those with necessarily false beliefs and those who judge with their senses. Because all truths exist in statements of speech and thought, the only way to learn the truth for Parmenides was deductive logic and not observation.

**On the Nature of Logic**

Parmenides’ celebrated sequence of deductions in 11.8 proved that his subject was ungenerated, imperishable, indivisible, motionless, and spherical. So, how can these ostensibly physical notions apply to logic?

The argument for timelessness most easily transfers to logic. Statements like P2 and C1 are true and there are no conditions under which they might be false; the same is true of the fundamental principles of logic such as the mentioned principles of non-contradiction and bivalence. Hence, Parmenides rightfully barred us from believing that their truth arose from what is false or inexistent, from believing they may be necessitated at one time and not another, and especially from believing “the force of conviction [will] ever permit anything to come to be.”[^{17}]

[^{16}]: 11.6 line 1. I am not certain this is grammatically sound, but it seems plausible. Guthrie attributes the more similar reading “It is necessary to say and to think that\textit{only} what is [das Seiende] is” to Kranz (Guthrie, 21).

[^{17}]: 11.8 lines 7-9, 9-10, and 12-13 respectively
follow Owen in arguing that Parmenides’ proof of continuity and indivisibility in 11.8 lines 22-25 are temporal proofs. Since Parmenides demonstrated that his subject may never begin or cease to exist, it follows that his subject exists continuously and indivisibly through time. Proving the application of other meanings of divisibility and continuity requires uncertain premises (Owen, 92-93). Since the principles of logic have always been true, they too are temporally continuous and indivisible. It again follows for rules of logic as for Parmenides’ subject in 11.8 lines 29-33 that they are motionless since they do not change with respect to time.

That Parmenides declared his subject to be “like the bulk of a well-rounded ball” in 11.8 line 43 is perhaps the greatest obstruction for my interpretation, but it is not insurmountable. First, the description Parmenides gave was incongruent with true spherical geometry. “It must be not at all greater or smaller here than there” and that it is not stopped “from reaching its like”\(^{18}\) are statements about a thing with infinite extension and the principles of logic necessarily apply to all points of space. Second, Owen disputed that Parmenides was referring to a physical ball shape since the arguments Parmenides gave in 11.8 lines 46-48 paralleled and drew their premises from the continuity argument in 11.8 lines 22-25. The continuity argument proved that no part of Parmenides’ subject was temporally bounded by inexistence, so the same argument cannot have proved the subject spatially was spatially bounded by inexistence. So I conclude that identifying Parmenides’ subject with logic does not produce contradictions, in the final part of the Way of Truth, but appears to coincide with possible properties of logic itself.

**In the Land of Light and Night**

Any good interpretation of the poem must explain why Parmenides’ truth-telling goddess expounded the “deceitful” cosmology of mortals. I will show how metaphysical interpretations must

\(^{18}\) 11.8 lines 44-45 and 46-47
give inadequate answers to why the goddess also expounded the ways of mortal knowledge and then show how the epistemic interpretation avoids the same trap.

Metaphysical interpretations are both contrary to common sense since they completely contradict the existence of the external world and contradictory to the words of the goddess who promised to speak the truth. If there is only the One being, then there is no room for the sensible world to exist at all and all sensory experiences are deceptions. However, just before explaining the Way of Truth, the goddess stated that “The things that appear must genuinely be, being always, indeed, all things.” This statement and the claim that thoughts exist directly contradicts their being One entity in the universe, since human thoughts must be. So Parmenides would surely not have written those lines if he believed there was, in fact, just one being.

Conversely, my analysis permits Parmenides to believe in the existence of the physical or phenomenal; it just requires that the external world does not contain necessary truths. The things that appear to humans must exist, but since they were transmitted from the physical world they are contingent and can never be indubitably demonstrated. I am not committed to either the view that duality of principles the goddess introduced, light and night, are physical substrates or that they are phenomenal principles. However, I find Reinhardt’s phenomenological account compelling; light and darkness are sensory opposites and together comprise the mixture of truth and falsity of every sense datum (Reinhardt, 294-295). Parmenides may have believed that deductive a priori truth existed in an unchanging (proto-Platonic) otherworld whereas knowledge of our own world of sensory experiences was forever-limited to the incomplete explorations of inductive science.

**Conclusion**

One might accuse me of making Parmenides’ radical poem too palatable. Yet, I simply do not find it plausible that the thinker who first applied deductive logic to philosophical pursuits
argued for an obviously false thesis. But maybe I am wrong. In any case, my arguments have hopefully demonstrated the possibility that Parmenides aspired to spread the “divinely” powerful tool of deductive logic. Ultimately, the poem’s incompleteness and obscure writing may preclude any interpretation from prevailing; each is just another mortal opinion “in which there is no true reliance.”\textsuperscript{19}
Works Cited


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20 Citations in MLA 7th ed. Page ranges indicate all pages read throughout research.

21 The isolated Greek text Diels gave can be found here for easier reading: <http://philoctetes.free.fr/parmenidese.htm>.