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# Gorgias and Antilogic in Plato's *Parmenides*

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This paper focuses on the influence of Gorgias and his antilogic method on the second part of the *Parmenides*. I will show that Plato was directly inspired by Gorgias' treatise *On Not-Being*, not only in specific passages but also and more importantly in his whole approach and reasoning. This use of the sophist can shed light, as I will show, on one of the most disputed questions in Platonic studies, namely the aim of the second part of the *Parmenides*. I will finally highlight the similarities between the Gorgian method Plato uses in the *Parmenides* and a practice he otherwise condemns, namely antilogic.

Gorgias, dialectic, sophists, method, antilogic

This *Symposium Platonicum* has witnessed a renewal of interest in Plato's sources for the *Parmenides* that went beyond the usual focus on the main characters of the dialogue, Parmenides and Zeno. For it appeared that Plato's ontological investigation is much more anchored in the previous debates than it was usually considered. Many contributions have established parallels between some of Plato's arguments or theses and the ones of various Presocratic thinkers. In this paper, I wish to carry on with my investigation in another article on Gorgias' and Melissus' influence on the first hypothesis<sup>1</sup> and examine more generally the influence of sophistry on Plato's method in the second part of the *Parmenides*.

The interpretation of this second part is clearly one of the most debated issues in Platonic studies. For within the eight deductions, not only does each hypothesis lead to contradictions, but the same premise is developed into two deductions that lead to opposite conclusions. Why does Plato present such contradictory deductions and what does he hope to achieve through them? Interpretations fall into two categories:<sup>2</sup>

1) Some critics mitigate the contradictions and claim that Plato supports some positive doctrine in the second part. The main way to argue for this thesis is by claiming that the various deductions do not deal with the same object (this is the Neoplatonic reading) or that they do not target the same aspects of the one (as many recent critics say).

2) Another approach consists in assuming the contradictions and claiming that Plato does not support any positive thesis in the second part. There are then two main ways to explain the contradictory reasoning: it is either regarded as just an exercise without any

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<sup>1</sup> Brémond 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Meinwald 1991, 20–21.

philosophical implications (this interpretation has little success nowadays) or as a refutation of a certain conception of the one.

I will support the second kind of interpretation and regard the second part of the *Parmenides* as a refutation of Eleatic ontology.<sup>3</sup> I intend to show that taking into consideration Plato's sophistic source (mainly Gorgias) and the connection between his approach in the second part of the *Parmenides* and sophistry can help us understand his aim and method.

Since Plato's reliance on Gorgias' treatise *On Not-Being*, although it has been noticed by several authors,<sup>4</sup> is still quite neglected by critics, I will first provide a few indications to establish this point. I will then examine how the second part of the *Parmenides* as a whole is inspired by Gorgias' approach and how this helps us grasp the aim of Plato's reasoning. I will finally show that Plato's method is similar to the one he criticises in other treatises, i.e. antilogic.

## 1. Gorgias in Plato's *Parmenides*

I will only present here two similarities<sup>5</sup> between Plato's *Parmenides* and Gorgias' *On Not-Being*.<sup>6</sup> The first one lies in Plato's repetition of the three theses that are defended in *On Non-Being*:

**T1.** [Gorgias] says that there is nothing. And if there is, it is unknowable. And if there is and it is knowable, it cannot be shown to others. (Pseudo-Aristotle MXG 5 979a12–13)

This triad existence/knowledge/communication appears several times in the *Parmenides*,<sup>7</sup> in particular at the end of the first two hypotheses:

**T2.** Therefore, the one is in no way. — Apparently not (...) — But what is not, could there be anything for or of it? — How could it? — Then there is for it no name, discourse, science, perception or opinion (*Parmenides* 141e–142a).

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<sup>3</sup> A criticism one might address to any attempt to make the deductions compatible and all true at the same time, as noted by Palmer 1999, 154–56, is that Plato explicitly claims in 142a that the conclusions of the first hypothesis should be rejected.

<sup>4</sup> See in particular, beside my own article, Mansfeld 1986, 258–65 and Palmer 1999, 108–17.

<sup>5</sup> See other examples in Brémond 2019, in particular 91–92.

<sup>6</sup> The treatise was not transmitted as such, but we know it through two summaries: the first is in the Pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *On Melissus, Xenophanes and Gorgias (MXG)* 5–6, the second in Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians (AM)* VII.65–87. The two texts are broadly similar but present significant differences in the detail of the arguments. It is generally acknowledged that the pseudo-Aristotle is somewhat more reliable, even if the corrupt state of the transmitted text often makes it difficult to handle.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Palmer 1999, 108–9 and Brémond 2019, 76–77.

Therefore, the one was, is and will be, and it came to be, comes to be and will come to be. — Certainly. — And there would be something for or of it, and it was, is and will be. — Of course! — And there would be a science, an opinion and a perception of it, since we are doing all of this right now about it. — You are right. — And there is a name and a discourse for it, and it is named and said (*Prm.* 155d–e).

The second parallel, which is even more striking, consists in the repetition of one of Gorgias' arguments, namely the demonstration that the one being cannot be anywhere, in the following passage:

**T3.** And of course, if it is really like this, it could be nowhere. For it could not be **(a)** in something else **(b)** nor in itself. — How is that? — **(a)** If it were in something else, it would be contained in a circle by that in which it is, which would touch it in many places with many parts. But it is impossible for what is one and without parts and does not partake to the circle to be touched in a circle in many places. — It is impossible. — **(b)** However, if it were in itself, nothing other than itself would contain it, since it would be in itself (...). Then, the container would be different from the content. For the same thing will not both endure and act as a whole at the same time. And then the one would no longer be one, but two. — Indeed. — Therefore, the one is nowhere, since it is neither in itself nor in something else. — It is not (*Prm.* 138a–b).

And if it is unlimited, it is nowhere. **(a)** For if it is anywhere, what it is in is different from it, and being will no longer be unlimited if something contains it. For the container will be bigger than the content, and nothing is bigger than the unlimited, so that the unlimited is not anywhere. **(b)** And it is not contained in itself either. For what it is in and what is in it will be the same thing, and being will become two, place and body (...). But this is absurd: therefore, being is not in itself either (*Sextus Empiricus AM VII.69–70*).<sup>8</sup>

The similarities between the two texts are quite obvious. Both Gorgias and Plato take two possibilities into consideration, namely that the one being is either **(a)** in something else or **(b)** in itself; but it cannot be in either, therefore it is nowhere. The variations, especially in part **(a)**, can be explained by differences in the premise: whereas Plato makes the demonstration rest on the fact that the one has no parts nor form, Gorgias takes as a premise that being is unlimited. However, the argument in part **(b)** is identical: both authors show that if being is in itself, it will be two, the container and the content, which is impossible.

Therefore, it is undeniable that Plato, even though he never mentions him by name, is inspired by Gorgias in the *Parmenides*. And we might already note that in the two parallels I mentioned, he does not criticise the theses and arguments he borrows from Gorgias, but he rather uses them to prove his own point.

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<sup>8</sup> The *MXG* has an abridged version of the argument, which only mentions part b.

## 2. Gorgias' Method and Its Platonic Use

Those who noticed those parallels (including me) usually emphasise that these repetitions of Gorgias are particularly present in the first hypothesis,<sup>9</sup> which suggests that the conception of the Eleatic one in that hypothesis is particularly inspired by the way Gorgias represents it. However, I wish to leave aside those specific parallels and examine more broadly the relationship between Gorgias' method and Plato's. I will argue that Plato does not just take up a few arguments but also the spirit of Gorgias' refutation, and that this sheds some light on Plato's own project in the second part of the *Parmenides*.

Although the question of Gorgias' exact aim, and in particular of his treatise's seriousness, is debated,<sup>10</sup> it is quite admitted that he sought to criticise the philosophers of his time, and in particular the Eleatics, by using their own way of reasoning to deny their theses. For the deductive method he uses as well as his arguments are broadly borrowed from these thinkers.<sup>11</sup> However, he uses them to refute fundamental theses of Presocratic philosophy and of the Eleatics in particular, namely the existence of something and the possibility of knowing it and making it known.<sup>12</sup> His enterprise is therefore essentially destructive, and it is primarily aimed at the Eleatics.

More precisely, Gorgias' refutation mainly consists in a double *reductio ad absurdum*. He starts with one hypothesis, i.e. that  $x$  is  $y$ , and shows that it necessarily leads to contradictions, therefore this hypothesis is false. He then turns to the opposite hypothesis, i.e. that  $x$  is not- $y$ ,<sup>13</sup> and shows that it is also contradictory. This allows him to reject the very existence of the object in question ( $x$ ), since any claim about it turns out to be false. For example, he shows that neither being nor not-being are<sup>14</sup> and rejects as a consequence any form of existence.

The contradictions he raises consist themselves in opposing two possible consequences of the thesis. This may take two forms: Gorgias shows that to support a claim, one must either assume two contradictory theses (both  $A$  and not- $A$ : I will call this a "positive contradiction") or reject both (neither  $A$  nor not- $A$ : "negative contradiction"), both of which are impossible. We find a positive

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<sup>9</sup> Palmer 1999, 108–17 and Brémond 2019.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the various options, see Caston 2002, 205–7.

<sup>11</sup> This is particularly clear in the case of Melissus, from whom Gorgias borrows the argument that if being is eternal, it must be unlimited (see Sextus *AM* VII.68–69 = Melissus fragment B2). The pseudo-Aristotle himself underlines this aspect: "if it is ungenerated, he assumes thanks to Melissus' axiom that it is unlimited" (*MXG* 6 979b21–22).

<sup>12</sup> This association between being, knowledge and language is especially strong in Parmenides' poem: see B2.7–8, B3, B6.1–2, B8.16–18 and 34–36.

<sup>13</sup> In these demonstrations, not- $y$  is the opposite and not the contradictory of  $y$ : Gorgias does not oppose one and not-one, but one and many.

<sup>14</sup> According to Sextus Empiricus, he would also refute the thesis that both being and not-being are.

contradiction for example in the argument against the existence of not-being: if not-being is, it would both be and not-be.

**T4.** And indeed, not-being is not. For if not-being is, it will be and at the same time not be. For insofar as it is considered as a not-being, it will not be, but insofar as it is considered as *being* a not-being, then it will be. And it is absolutely absurd for something to be and at the same time not to be. Therefore, not-being is not (AM VII.66).<sup>15</sup>

But Gorgias' most characteristic approach is rather the negative contradiction, i.e. to show that if X is true, then neither A nor not-A are true, which is impossible. This method is particularly apparent in the first part of the treatise, where he deals with being. For, as I said, he first shows that nothing exists because neither being nor not-being can be. He uses the same structure to demonstrate that being is not: he demonstrates that being is neither generated nor eternal and neither one nor many and concludes that it cannot be.

**T5.** For necessarily, he says, if there is something, <it is either one or many and either ungenerated or generated. But if it is><sup>16</sup> neither one nor many nor ungenerated nor generated, there would be nothing. For if there were something, it would have to be one of the two (MXG 5 979a18–21).

Negative contradiction is further used in the arguments: for example, as we have seen, Gorgias shows that being is nowhere because it is neither in itself nor in something else (T3); or that it is not generated because it cannot come from being nor from non-being.<sup>17</sup>

This method clearly echoes the one of Plato in the second part of the *Parmenides*: two demonstrations starting from opposite hypotheses that lead to contradictions. One might think, however, that it is not original to Gorgias: for Gorgias himself was probably inspired by Zeno's approach, which would also be Plato's source of inspiration for the exercise of the *Parmenides* (135d).

Zeno's method is not identical to Gorgias', however.<sup>18</sup> We know that he presented paradoxes with the positive form of contradictions: if x is, it is both y and non-y. This structure appears in particular in **fragment B3**:

**T6.** If they are many, they are necessarily as many as they are and neither more nor less than themselves. And if they are as many as they are, they should be limited. But if they are many, beings are unlimited: for there are always other

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. MXG 5 979a25–28 for a similar but less clear argument.

<sup>16</sup> Add. Diels 1900.

<sup>17</sup> MXG 6 979b26–34, AM VII.71–72.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Palmer 1999, 113 and Brémond 2019, 86.

things between beings, and again others between them. Therefore, beings are unlimited.

This kind of paradox has been considered as typical of Zeno in the early reception. For this is how Isocrates and Plato characterise him:

**T7.** Zeno, who tried to demonstrate that the same things are possible and again impossible (*Isocrates Praise of Helen 3*) ...<sup>19</sup>

Don't you know that the Eleatic Palamedes had such a technique of speech that it seemed to his auditors that the same things are like and unlike, one and many, and again at rest and moved (*Plato Phdr. 261d*)?

What do you mean, Zeno, by "if beings are many, then they must be both like and unlike, and that is impossible, because the unlike cannot be like nor the like unlike" (*Prm. 127e*)?

Thus, Gorgias' method could be seen as more or less the same as Zeno's, except that he would have developed and mostly used negative contradictions instead of positive ones.

There is a crucial difference, however, especially if one adopts Plato's reading of Zeno's paradoxes. For according to Plato, they would have been conceived to support Parmenides' thesis (*Prm. 128a–b*): Zeno would show that the many are contradictory in order to demonstrate that everything is one. But Gorgias' contradictions do not (and cannot) lead to positive results, since he rejects, as we have seen, every possible thesis on a subject. While Zeno's contradictions would aim to support a claim, then, Gorgias' are completely destructive.

Since he demonstrates impossibilities thanks to Eleatic arguments and reasoning, it is likely that Gorgias aimed to reject Eleatism, and perhaps through it philosophy as a whole: if Eleatic arguments cannot lead to any knowledge but on the contrary destroy it, one may deduce that the fault lies in their reasoning itself.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, Gorgias probably thought either that deductive argumentation does not give access to any truth, or that objects such as being cannot be known (possibly both at the same time).

Now, it appears that Plato's method in the second part of the *Parmenides* is more similar to Gorgias' than to Zeno's in this respect. And this is a point that he himself stresses. For when presenting the exercise, he states that he will take up Zeno's method, but with two differences: first, he will apply it to forms instead of the sensible (135e), and second, that he will examine what follows not only from the existence of something, but also from its non-existence:

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Adamson rightly pointed out to me that Isocrates' formulation does not completely correspond to positive contradiction, since Zeno's demonstrations do not contain any modal nuance. I take it, however, that Isocrates is still referring to the positive kind of contradictions I described, although not very accurately.

<sup>20</sup> I agree with the analysis of McKirahan 2010, 393: "the fact that the same sort of argument could be used to prove these obviously false propositions as was used to prove propositions which the Eleatics seem to have intended seriously casts doubt on their methods and on the conclusions that derive whatever plausibility they have from the arguments on which they are based."

**T8.** But one should also do the following: not only make the hypothesis for each thing that it is and examine what follows from this hypothesis, but also make the hypothesis that the same thing is not, if you want to train better (*Prm.* 135e–136a).

Like Gorgias, then, he will not examine a single thesis but pairs of contradictory claims. And, just as in the treatise *On Non-Being*, these opposite claims all lead to impossibilities, whether positive or negative contradictions; even from the same premise opposite conclusions are reached. Contrarily to Zeno then, Plato cannot use his reasoning to demonstrate a positive thesis, but, as he points out in the famous conclusion of the treatise, his only achievement is to uncover a complex set of contradictions within every possible thesis concerning the one and the other things. As a consequence, I think that Plato may have the same goal as Gorgias: to completely reject a certain kind of reasoning, i.e. Eleatic ontology, by showing that it necessarily leads to absurdities.<sup>21</sup>

An important difference, however, is that Gorgias seems to consider his treatise as a refutation of ontology as a whole, and even of any philosophical discourse: he does not go beyond destruction. But Plato's ontological thought does not stop at the refutation of Eleatism. On the one hand, the second part of the *Parmenides* itself contains many elements that go beyond the mere *reductio ad absurdum* of hypotheses. Plato does not just reproduce Gorgias' approach, but it is clear that he develops a number of concepts and arguments that will be of importance for his positive doctrine. On the other hand, in the *Sophist*, Plato presents an ontology that avoids the pitfalls into which the Eleatics fell. For him, unlike Gorgias, ontology is not doomed to failure. But it is only possible if one abandons the Eleatic paradigm and commits the famous parricide on Parmenides (*Soph.* 241d) in order to present a coherent discourse on being.

### 3. Antilogic and the *Parmenides*' Method

Given these similarities with Gorgias' treatise, I wish finally to examine how Plato himself would characterise his method in the second part of the *Parmenides*. Most people regard it as "dialectic".<sup>22</sup> But it is far from meeting the criteria for Platonic dialectic, as some critics, like Delcomminette 2010, already pointed out.<sup>23</sup> Actually, Plato never describes the method of the second part as dialectic, but only as γυμνασία, an exercise. To establish this point, let us examine some of Plato's definitions of dialectic.

- 1) In *Republic* VI, when making the famous division of the line, Plato describes dialectic as 1) the art of dialogue and 2) a way to reach the first principles (511b–c). But in the second part of the *Parmenides*, dialogue is reduced to minimum and there is no true interaction

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<sup>21</sup> On the Eleatic character of Plato's reasoning in the second part of the *Parmenides*, see Brisson 1996.

<sup>22</sup> See for example, among many others, Cornford 1939, 109, Meinwald 1991, 19 and Palmer 1999, 107. Of course, one may call the second part of the *Parmenides* "dialectic" in a non-Platonic sense, but this point is rarely specified.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. also Gourinat 2001, 240–41.



between the young Aristotle and Parmenides: Parmenides himself admits that Aristotle's role is not to be too meddlesome (πολυπράγμων) and to provide pauses (137b). And instead of reaching the principle of everything, the reasoning rather starts with the hypothesis of the one.

- 2) In *Phaedrus* 265c–266b, Plato characterises the dialectician as someone who has the capacity to give definitions and divide the various aspects of a notion. But it is remarkable that the *Parmenides* never defines any of the terms it uses, and in particular “one”.<sup>24</sup>
- 3) In *Sophist* 253d, Plato even claims that “to divide according to kinds and not to think that the same form is different or that being different it is the same, are we not going to say that this belongs to the dialectical science?” Plato clearly rejects in this passage that what he does in the second part of the *Parmenides*, i.e. constantly claiming that the one is both the same and different or neither of them at the same time, can be called “dialectic”.

Delcomminette argues that the second part of the *Parmenides* has more to do with the hypothetical approach Plato describes in *Republic* VI (510b–511a), because the reasoning rests on hypotheses.<sup>25</sup> However, I think that it is more pertinent, in light of my previous remarks on the *Gorgian* inspiration, to oppose dialectic to sophistry than to the hypothetical sciences of the *Republic*.<sup>26</sup> I will argue that Plato himself would regard his method as sophistic, and more precisely as corresponding in most respects to what he abundantly criticises elsewhere, namely antilogic (ἀντιλογία).

Plato's characterisation of antilogic indeed matches the *Gorgian* method he uses in the *Parmenides*. For antilogic is the ability to contradict, i.e. to refute in a dialog by showing that a certain thesis leads to contradictions.<sup>27</sup> It is considered in *Sophist* 232b as the main activity of the sophist: to contradict (ἀντιλέγειν) and teach others to contradict. Plato presents antilogic as a harmful practice and as similar to eristic.<sup>28</sup> The aim of antilogic is therefore above all victory over the adversary, not truth.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Brisson 1996, 88–89.

<sup>25</sup> He also highlights the fact that the deductions of the *Parmenides* use images, a space-time representation of the one, which would be typical of the hypothetical sciences.

<sup>26</sup> One could criticise Delcomminette's reading by emphasising that the hypothetical method does not question the hypotheses it rests on, but regards them as obvious (*Resp.* VI 510c). By contrast, Parmenides constantly backtracks and rejects one hypothesis for another.

<sup>27</sup> See *Soph.* 225b–c, where Plato defines antilogic as a controversy (ἀμφισβήτησις), i.e. a confrontation of one *logos* to another (λόγοις πρὸς λόγους), “in private and cut up in questions and answers” (ἐν ἰδίῳις αὖ καὶ κατακεκερματισμένον ἐρωτήσεις πρὸς ἀποκρίσεις). In *Phaedrus* 261c though, Plato also considers public discourses in court as antilogic. This practice is clearly staged in the *Euthydemus*, even though Plato calls the technique of Euthydemus and his brother “eristic” (272b) and not “antilogic”.

<sup>28</sup> On the lack of difference between antilogic and eristic, see Lachance 2017, 53 and 2018, 154–56, against Kerferd 1981, 62–65. In *Sophist* 225b–c, the two techniques are barely distinguished: antilogic is divided into the one that concerns contracts, which does not have a name, and the one that deals with “the fair itself and the unfair and other things in general”, namely eristic.

As a consequence, it is often presented as a non-serious game: antilogicians are regularly compared with children playing and refuting only for their own pleasure.<sup>30</sup>

Despite this lack of seriousness, antilogicians present themselves as particularly wise, since they are able to contradict any thesis.<sup>31</sup> But according to Plato, these contradictions arise because the terms are not clearly defined: he often blames antilogicians for relying only on words and not on meaning.<sup>32</sup> This lack of distinction tends to create confusion and assimilate everything.<sup>33</sup> Thus, their refutations are not about reality but appearances: their ability to contradict everything does not rely on any knowledge, but on a play on the different meanings of words.<sup>34</sup>

Plato is particularly concerned about the effects of antilogic on young people and condemns its use in front of a young audience. First, because of their lack of maturity, they are more susceptible to be caught up in the game and use antilogic for pleasure. Even worse, since antilogic only refutes and does not support positive claims, young people risk losing their faith in the opinions they had until then (particularly on ethics) without being able to conceive stronger ones. Plato highlights then two possible consequences of antilogic: in **Republic VII 539b–d**, he denounces the risk of scepticism (τὸ μηδὲν ἠγεῖσθαι) and immorality. And in **Phaedo 89e–91b**, he claims that people risk being led to “misology”, the hatred of discourses: they see that no argument can stand against refutation and conclude that discourses cannot be trusted.

Now, in the second part of the *Parmenides*, it appears that Plato makes all the mistakes he blames antilogic and the sophists for. Firstly, he presents a contradictory reasoning that gives the impression that the one is everything and its opposite.<sup>35</sup> It is especially striking that Plato explicitly condemns in the *Sophist* those who talk about being in this way:

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<sup>29</sup> *Phd.* 101e and *Tht.* 164c–d.

<sup>30</sup> *Euthyd.* 278c, *Phd.* 101e, *Resp.* VII 539b–c and *Soph.* 235a; see also T9.

<sup>31</sup> *Euthyd.* 271c–272b, *Lys.* 216a, *Soph.* 233b–c. This conviction that any thesis can be refuted goes with the claim that nothing true and stable can be said about things (*Phd.* 90b–c).

<sup>32</sup> See *Euthyd.* 277e–278a, *Resp.* V 454a and *Tht.* 164c.

<sup>33</sup> *Phd.* 101e and *Phdr.* 261d–e.

<sup>34</sup> This defect is particularly well-represented in the *Euthydemus*. For example, the demonstration that neither the wise nor the ignorant can learn rests on the ambiguity of the verb *μανθάνω*, which means both “to learn” and “to understand” (275d–276c).

<sup>35</sup> Gourinat 2001, 248 questions the idea that the method of the *Parmenides* is similar to antilogic, because antilogic would consist in demonstrating opposite theses, not in starting from opposite hypotheses and showing that they lead to contradictions. But it is far from clear that Plato thinks that antilogic is limited to the demonstration of opposite theses without using hypotheses. Moreover, if antilogic did not start from hypotheses, as Gourinat himself notices, it would mean that Zeno would not present antilogies, while Plato explicitly claims that he does.

**T9.** To show that the same is different and the different the same and the big small and the like unlike in any possible way, and to take pleasure in constantly brandishing this kind of opposites in discussions, that is no true refutation, but clearly the childishness of someone who has just taken an interest in beings (*Soph.* 259d).

Secondly, his reasoning relies on terms he never defines:<sup>36</sup> indeed, many arguments of the second part of the *Parmenides* seem to rest on a lack of distinction between the terms.<sup>37</sup> Worse still, Parmenides presents these arguments in front of young people: Socrates is described as a “very young man” (σφόδρα νέον 127c), and Parmenides’ interlocutor, Aristotle, as the youngest of the assembly (137b–c).<sup>38</sup>

This affiliation between antilogic and the method of the *Parmenides* finds confirmation in the fact that Plato himself considers Zeno’s paradoxes, his official model, as antilogic. For in *Phaedrus* 261b–e, Socrates claims that antilogic is not just used in political contexts (trials and agora) but concerns every kind of topic; he gives as an example of non-political antilogic the discourse of the “Eleatic Palamedes”, i.e. Zeno (T7). In the *Parmenides* itself, Zeno describes the purpose of his book as contradicting (ἀντιλέγειν) Parmenides’ opponents (128d).<sup>39</sup> Plato himself admits, then, that the Eleatic reasoning he imitates in the second part of the *Parmenides* is antilogic.<sup>40</sup>

One could reply that antilogic is not necessarily a sophistic method: Kerferd 1981, 65 claims that it covers not only eristic sophistry, but also Socratic *elenchus*. There would then be a good use of antilogic, i.e. Socratic refutation, and a harmful sophistic one. But first, the terms ἀντιλογία and

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<sup>36</sup> Cornford 1939, 109–15 claims that the second part of the *Parmenides* intends to denounce the ambiguities of the terms “one” and “many” as used by the Eleatics. Brisson 1996 develops on the “primitivisme conceptuel” one can see in the *Parmenides*: see in particular 87–90 on the ambiguity of the terms.

<sup>37</sup> For example, Parmenides argues at the end of the first hypothesis that since the one is not in time and the verb “is” supposes a participation to present time, the one is not (141e). But this conclusion is only reached through a lack of distinction between the existential and the temporal meanings of “is”—a distinction Plato makes in *Ti.* 37e–38b. Plato indeed thinks that it is possible to exist (especially for forms) without taking part in time.

<sup>38</sup> Admittedly, Socrates is an exceptional young man, who deeply desires the truth and could not be brought to scepticism or misology. This is not the case, however, for the young Aristotle (who is indeed described as one of the future Thirty in 127d) nor for the rest of the assembly.

<sup>39</sup> One may also draw a parallel with the beginning of the *Sophist*, where Theaetetus, after presenting the Eleatic stranger as a disciple of Parmenides, specifies that he is not one of “those who are eager to quarrel (ἔρις)”: this indicates that Parmenides’ school was associated with eristic. Cf. Palmer 1999, 120–21.

<sup>40</sup> It is also interesting that Parmenides describes the exercise of deductions as chatter (ἀδολεσχία). For in the *Sophist*, Plato divides eristic into two kinds: one that is for free, which he calls ἀδολεσχικός, and one that makes money, i.e. sophistry. Chatter is defined as a discussion for the pleasure of those who talk and not particularly of the audience—a description that fits the hard and laborious second part of the *Parmenides*. Cf. Taylor 2006, 162–63.

ἀντιλέγειν are only used negatively in the Platonic corpus, to designate eristics.<sup>41</sup> The distinction between Socratic refutation and sophistry is also not as enlightening as one might expect. In the sixth division of the *Sophist*, Plato presents another definition of sophistry as purification from false opinions which is quite similar to Socratic *elenchus*, as many critics noticed—Plato calls it “noble sophistry” (231b). And rather than indicating how he understands the distinction between this good refutation and sophistry, Plato actually emphasises the difficulty of distinguishing them:

**T10.** This is why we must say, Theaetetus, that refutation (ἔλεγχον) is the greatest and best of purifications (...). — Absolutely. — Well? How shall we call those who use this technique? I am afraid to say “sophist”. — Why is that? — For fear of giving them too great an honour. — However, what we have just said seems to correspond to such an individual. — Like the wolf to the dog, the wildest to the tamest. A prudent man must more than anything always guard against similarities, for this kind is the most slippery. But so be it! For I do not think that the dispute will concern small boundaries, when they sufficiently protect them (*Soph.* 230d–231b).

Indeed, it is not easy to distinguish between Socratic *elenchus* and antilogic: in practice, they both conduct a dialogue that leads to the refutation of their interlocutor.<sup>42</sup> The main difference between the two of them, as underlined by Nehamas 1990, 10–11, is that Socrates does not aim to refute his opponent at any cost, while the antilogician is also an eristic, who only targets victory: but it is a difference in intention rather than in method.<sup>43</sup> There can also be a methodological difference, though: Socrates proceeds in his refutations by asking for definitions (the famous τί ἐστὶ questions), while antilogic rests on the ambiguity of terms.<sup>44</sup>

But even if one admits that there exists a clear distinction between the two practices, it is far from clear that the *Parmenides*’ exercise should be regarded as an example of Socratic refutation rather than sophistic antilogic. For regarding the criterion that Socrates does not aim for victory but for truth, Zeno himself presents the intention of his book as φιλονικία, the love of victory (128d–e), as opposed to the more respectable φιλοτιμία: this decidedly puts him on the side of eristic. Parmenides does not seem to look for victory, but he is not in the position either of the ignorant Socrates who tries to look for truth through discussion. Moreover, Socratic *elenchus* is mostly characterised as a purification from the interlocutor’s false opinions. But one can hardly say that Aristotle got “purified” from his false opinions, since he does not seem to have had any at all at the beginning of the discussion. Finally, as already mentioned, Parmenides never asks for definitions of

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<sup>41</sup> See Lachance 2018, 150–156.

<sup>42</sup> Taylor 2006 argues that most definitions of the *Sophist* could be applied in some way to Socrates. Zaks 2021 even claims that the whole treatise constructs and then solves this confusion between eristic and Socratic *elenchus*.

<sup>43</sup> Taylor 2006 also insists on the fact that Socrates does not charge a fee for his refutation.

<sup>44</sup> This difference might explain why, as is well established by Lachance 2018, Socrates’ *elenchus* is never described as antilogic.

the terms nor provides any. Hence, even if there exists a good antilogic that provides purification—which I doubt—, it appears that the second part of the *Parmenides* would not fall into that category anyway.

Another difference one could see between Plato's method in the second part of the *Parmenides* and antilogic is that it focuses on the forms, the object of Plato's dialectic, while the sophists do not, but either ignore or deny their existence.<sup>45</sup> But this distinction, again, is far from allowing the second part of the *Parmenides* to escape the accusation of being antilogic. For even though Parmenides claims that he will deal with the forms, his characterisation of the one, as has been noticed by many critics, is often sensible: contact, change and generation are regarded as potential properties of the one.<sup>46</sup> But Plato thinks that one cannot have any knowledge of this kind of property, which characterises the world of becoming, *genesis*, and not of being: this can explain why Parmenides does not reach any stable conclusion at the end of the treatise.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it appeared that Gorgias' refutation of Eleatism constitutes Plato's main source of inspiration for the exercise of the second part of the *Parmenides*. Plato is then deliberately practicing antilogic, despite his usual rejection of the method. It would remain to understand why Plato presents antilogic as a good exercise to know the forms—this should be the object of another paper. But it can be at least regarded as the best way to attack Eleatism for two reasons. For first, since Gorgias indeed used it for this purpose, it is sensible for Plato to carry on with this approach. Second, it is a good way to denounce some issues in Eleatism. For the antilogicians share with the Eleatics the characteristic of using the terms univocally: their lack of consideration for the different meanings of the terms and the precise relationship between them and other terms necessarily leads to contradictions. One should also keep in mind that in the *Sophist*, Plato's whole ontological investigation is motivated by the fact that the sophists found in Parmenides' doctrine a support for their claim that one cannot say anything false (236d–237a). For Parmenides' thesis that nothing can be said about not-being helps them claim that they cannot present illusions and lie.<sup>47</sup> It appears then that according to Plato, Eleatism in a way naturally leads to antilogic.<sup>48</sup> That is precisely the point the second part of the *Parmenides*, according to my interpretation, tries to bring into light.

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. Nehamas 1990, 11–13, who claims that what differentiates Platonic dialectic from sophistry is mainly its object, i.e. the forms.

<sup>46</sup> This ambiguity is responsible for the debate on whether the one in the second part of the *Parmenides* is the physical universe or the form of the one. Cf. Gourinat 2001, 236–39.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. the argument in *Euthyd.* 283e–284c that it is impossible to lie.

<sup>48</sup> This is clearly not the only aspect in which Eleatic claims can be used to support sophistic theses: see also for example an argument in *Euthydemus* 283c–d that rests on the Eleatic premise that any change is necessarily a destruction (cf. Melissus fragment B7).

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