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WHAT ARE ZENO AND PARMENIDES TALKING ABOUT?¹

Luc Brisson
CNRS, Paris

Abstract: Zeno wishes to show that the hypothesis defended by Parmenides is the only one possible: *ei hén esti tò ón*. This formulation is not to be found in the *Parmenides*. Understanding the hypothesis *ei hén estin* as meaning “if the universe is one”, and taking the subject of *estin* as *tò pân* (the universe), which is equivalent to being (*tò ón*) and not *hén* ([the] one), which must therefore be considered as an attribute, is in no way contradicted by the expression *tò hén* (the or this one), frequently reappearing in the second half of the *Parmenides*. According to the interpretation defended here, the expression *tò hén* does not refer to the One beyond existence, or even to a Form, but to that being which is one, i.e. to the whole that is the universe. Such a reading is also supported by a solid

¹ This piece is based on the Introduction of *Platon, Parménide*, présentation, traduction et notes par Luc Brisson, Paris, Flammarion, 1994, 2011³ [GF 688]. Translation of Plato, *Parmenides* is by Mary Louise Gill and Paul Ryan (modified), in J.M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (ed), Plato, *Complete Works* (Indianapolis/ Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1997. Translation of Parmenides’ *Poem* is by Denis O’Brien, in P. Aubenque (ed.), *Études sur Parménide*, tome I. *Le Poème de Parménide*, texte, traduction, essai critique (Paris: Vrin, 1987).

point of grammar: in ancient Greek, *tó*, corresponding to the definite article in English, is derived from a demonstrative adjective, as is the definite article in English.

Keywords: Parmenides, Zeno of Elea, Plato, the universe, one

If we are to believe Plato, Zeno was discussing the sensible world. In conversation with Socrates, Parmenides is very clear on this point: “The manner (of training) is just what you (Socrates) heard from Zeno, he (Parmenides) said. Except I was also impressed by something you had to say to him; you didn’t allow him to remain among visible things and observe their wandering between opposites. You asked him to observe it instead among those things that one might above all grasp by means of reason and might think to be forms.” (135d-e) In this passage, Parmenides refers to what Socrates had said before: “...but I would, as I say, be much more impressed if someone were able to display this same difficulty, which you and Parmenides went through in the case of visible things, also similarly entwined in multifarious ways in the forms themselves – in things that are grasped by reasoning “ (130a1). If Zeno’s argumentation in his book had not dealt with sensible particulars, there would be no reason for Socrates to bring up the hypothesis of the existence of the Forms as a solution to the paradox concerning similarity and dissimilarity among sensible particulars (128e-130a). From this point of view, *tà ónta* (beings)², which Zeno shows not to be

² I have used the following system of transliteration. Greek letters are written in Roman letters according to the following system: eta = *e*; omega = *o*; zeta = *z*; theta = *th*; xi = *x*; phi = *ph*; khi = *kh*; psi = *ps*. Iota subscript is written after the letter (for example *ei*, but if it is an alpha (which in this case only is a long vowel) with a subscript iota = *ai*), rough breathings are written as *h*, and smooth breathings are not noted. All accents are noted.

many (127d1), can only be particular sensible things. However, by attacking the hypothesis *ei pollá esti tà ónta* (127d1), Zeno wishes to show that the hypothesis defended by Parmenides is the only one possible. It follows that this hypothesis must be the following: *ei hén esti tò ón*.

This formulation is not to be found in the *Parmenides*, but when Socrates addresses Parmenides, he declares: “You (= Parmenides) say in your poem that the universe is one (*sù ... phèis éinai tò pân*), and you give splendid and excellent proofs for that; he (= Zeno), for his part, says that it is not many (*hóde dè aú ou pollá phésin éinai*) and gives a vast array of very grand proofs of his own. So, with one of you saying “one” (*tò oún tôn mèn hèn phánai*) and the other “not many” (*tòn dè mē pollá*), and with each of you speaking in a way that suggests that you’ve said nothing the same although you mean practically the same thing – what you appear to have said over the heads of the rest of us”. (128a8-b6). In this passage, *tò pân* is equivalent to *tò ón*, since, in a pre-Platonic context, there is no other domain of reality than the sensible, the totality of which is the universe.

The question then becomes one of realizing that only the universe which is one is real, and that the plurality of things enclosed within it is but apparent. This amounts to saying that Parmenides and Zeno are talking about the same thing, that is, the universe which is being, but considered according to two viewpoints. If the universe is considered as such, one must admit that it has no birth, that it does not change, and therefore that it will not perish. It can therefore only be one, not only from a numerical viewpoint, but also from a structural one: it must be a whole without parts. If, on the other hand, what is considered are the sensible things contained by the universe, it must be observed that these things are born, never cease changing, and perish. As parts of the totality constituted by the universe, they

are, moreover, multiple. In this context, it is easy to understand why these *tà ónta* known as the sensible particulars contained by the universe are called *tà álla*, since, from this point of view, they are other than the being constituted by the universe, which is one (*hén*).

Understanding the hypothesis *ei hén estin* as meaning “if the universe is one”, and taking the subject of *estin* as *tò pân* (the universe), which is equivalent to being (*tò ón*) and not *hén* ([the] one), which must therefore be considered as an attribute, is in no way contradicted by the expression *tò hén* (the or this one), frequently reappearing in the second half of the *Parmenides*. According to the interpretation I am defending, the expression *tò hén* does not refer to the One beyond existence, or even to a Form, but to that being which is one, i.e. to the whole that is the universe. Such a reading is also supported by a solid point of grammar: in ancient Greek, *tó*, corresponding to the definite article in English, is derived from a demonstrative adjective, as is the definite article in English.

The structure of the second part of the *Parmenides*

In the second part of the *Parmenides*, only one hypothesis is involved: Parmenides’s “if it is one”. However, this hypothesis is taken not only as an affirmation but as a negation, with regard to the one³ and to other things. This gives us eight series of deductions, divided into two sets, which form the two sub-sections making up the second part of the *Parmenides*. For the sake of

³ Understood as a predicate, and not as a subject.

clarity and to avoid any ambiguity, I will refer to eight “series of deductions”⁴ rather than to eight “hypotheses”, as is usual.

Hence this table:

A) Parmenides’s hypothesis is affirmed

And from this affirmed hypothesis positive and negative consequences are drawn for the one and for other things.

1) Positive consequences

– for the one: II a) 142b-155e1 b) 155e-157b⁵

– and for other things: III 157b-159a

2) Negative consequences

– for the one: I 137c-142a

– and for other things: IV 159b-160b

B) Parmenides’s hypothesis is negated

And from this negated hypothesis positive and negative consequences are drawn for the one and for other things.

1) Positive consequences

– for the one: V 160b-163b

– and for other things: VII 164b-165e

2) Negative consequences

– for the one: VI 163b-164b

– and for other things: VIII 165e-166c

Thus we have eight⁶ series of deductions involving four pairs, each of which has a positive and a negative branch.

⁴ A deduction is the operation leading rigorously from one or several propositions, taken as premises, to a proposition that is their necessary consequence, following rules of logic.

⁵ *Parm.* 155e3-157b4 is considered as a corollary to the second hypothesis and not as a third hypothesis, as the Neoplatonists believed; they saw it as describing the soul, the third “hypostasis” in their metaphysical system.

⁶ This number means we consider 155e3-157b4 not as a third series of deductions, as did the Neoplatonists, but as a corollary to the second one (142b1-155e2).

If we accept this distribution, the passage from 160b4 to 160d3 will not be part of any series of deductions, but a summary of what has just been deduced in the series.

A standard collection of cosmological oppositions

The eight series of deductions should all, in principle, have the same sections. However, only the first two series of deductions deal completely with the question, the second being the more complete of the two since it implies the section in contact/not in contact. Regarding the other series of deductions, some sections are missing, while others, whether they are developed or mentioned in passing, appear without following the order that characterizes them in the first two series. This inventory raises the question as to whether there was a standard series of cosmological oppositions (see the Table).

This table provides a static classification. We could, however, provide a dynamic classification. Here is how these oppositions interconnect.

one/many

whole/parts

limited/unlimited

number

figure: straight/circular

located in something else/in itself

contact

at rest/in movement

identity/difference

similar/dissimilar

in contact/not in contact

same age/different age

existence

knowledge, language

Being one or being many implies being a whole or having parts and being identical or being different. Being a whole or having parts makes possible or impossible having limits, having a number or a figure; being located somewhere and being at rest or in movement; each of these possibilities or impossibilities stems one from the other in a coherent sequence. In addition, being identical or different makes possible or impossible being similar or dissimilar and being equal or unequal within space and time. Consequently, being or not being within time is the condition for being or not being, as knowledge and language must have being as an object.

If we suppose this structure, the second part of the *Parmenides* appears not as a rhapsody of arguments, but as a coherent set of deductions obeying an overall plan. We understand, then, how the eight series of deductions form the conceptual structure of a cosmology that constitutes their background. We are not dealing with a cosmological description, as we find in the *Timaeus*, but with an inventory of the presuppositions and definitions on which this type of description is founded. In other words, while the *Timaeus* is presented in narrative form, the *Parmenides* provides the “tool box” required for the construction of a cosmological model.

Several indications tend in this direction. As we shall see, there is no being but in time (141e7-8), just as there is no being but in space (151a3-4; cf. 145e1). Parts are enveloped by the whole (138b1), as in a sphere (138a3). Participation is defined as “being in” (159d6-e2).

Detailed analysis

The content of this “tool box” reflects a certain conceptual primitivism, characterized by the lack of autonomy between different realms, i.e. the linguistic, the logical, the cosmological and the ontological realms. This primitivism lends supplementary credence to the idea that Plato’s representation of Parmenides and Zeno in the *Parmenides* is fairly faithful. Let us examine this situation in detail.

One/many

In fact, since one (*hén*) and many (*pollá*) are strict opposites⁷ and relatives, because a thing must be one or many. If we consider one thing (*hén*), the other things are many (*pollá*). And, since one and many are opposites, what is neither one nor many is nothing⁸.

Whole/part

The whole (*hólon*) and the part (*méros*) are opposite and relative, and they derive from the opposition one/many. A whole is necessarily one (*hén*), and its parts, which are multiple (*pollá*), are other things (*állassa*) with regard to this one, for in order for there to be parts, there must be multiplicity. The part is “part of a whole” (137c5, cf. 144e7), since the whole is “that which is missing no part” (137c6, cf. 145c4-5). From this point of view, the whole is a unit made up of many things (157c5-6, 157d8-e1); and conversely, the only parts are those making up the whole (157c4-5). The whole is that by which the parts are enveloped (145a1), all the parts (145b6-7); hence a conception of the universe

⁷ Strict opposites may be defined as follows: A and B are strict opposites if and only if A implies non-B, and B implies non-A. In this perspective, to postulate A is to deny B, and conversely. Strict opposites are thus relatives.

⁸ On this opposition, see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* X3, 1054a20sq.

as the envelope of all sensible things. From this standpoint, the whole, likened to a material envelope, is one, and it contains many parts. Since the envelope is supposed to be bigger than what is inside, a thing cannot be part of itself (146b5, 157d1-2), whether that thing is considered as a whole (145b5-6) or as a part (156b4-5). Each part of a whole, which contains many parts, is one (159d3-6). Whenever a part becomes part of a whole, it consequently becomes limited (158c6-d1). Conversely, if the parts of what appears to form a whole are absolutely without unity, there is no longer a whole but rather a mass that can be broken down indefinitely, which is the case in the 6th and 8th series of deductions, where everything has a dream-like quality.

Limit/unlimited

The whole has limits (145a1), that is, a beginning, a middle and an end (145a5-8), only if it has parts (144e7-145a1). The beginning (*hē arkhē*), middle (*tò méson*) and end (*hē teleutē*) of a thing are the parts of that thing (137d4-5). Hence the following consequences. 1) A whole has extremities (145a6-8), which means it has limits. 2) For each thing, the beginning and the end, which are the extremities (*tà éskhata*) (146a6-7), can be considered its limits (*tà pérata*) (137d6). 3) The middle is at equal distance from the extremities (145b1-2). 4) Beginning, middle and end always appear in that order (153c2-4). 5) Finally, it is as a whole that a thing has limits (144e7-145a2). 6) If a thing has neither beginning nor end, it is said to be limitless (*ápeiron*) (137d6-7).

However, in order for there to be number and figure, there must be limits in plurality and in space.

Number

A description of how number is formed presupposes one and many, whole and parts, and even limit and limitless. The small-

est number is one (153a7-b1). Plurality therefore begins after one (153a4-5), and follows an order corresponding to the way parts are organized into a whole: beginning, middle, end (153c2-4). In the realm of numbers, expansion is unlimited (144a2-3), meaning a larger number can always be found than the number preceding it (according to $n + 1$). Number cannot be limited from the point of view of plurality (144a5). On the other hand, number is a whole made up of units; and in order to have number, there must be unity (149c6-7). In addition, the smallest numbers appear first, and the bigger numbers follow. Briefly stated, number implies these four notions: unity, plurality, limits and order. Plurality (*pollá*) can be considered from two points of view: if it is limitless, it is multitude (*plêthos*), but if it is limited, it is number (*arithmós*, cf. 151d2-3).

Figure

In the second part of the *Parmenides*, only two types of figure (*tò skhêma*) are considered: circle and straight line (137d7-e1), or a mixture of both (145b2-4). A circle is defined as “that whose extremities are at equal distance from the center” (137e2-3), and a line, as “that whose center intercepts the view between its extremities (137e3-4)⁹; in a line, the center is equidistant from the beginning and the end, and, in a circle, it is equidistant from all the points on the circumference¹⁰. As we see, the definitions of figure, circle and straight line involve no more than the notions of beginning, end and middle, which are considered as parts of that figure we can refer to as a whole (145a4-b4). To these notions we can add that of order, for the parts of a figure are always presented in the same order (153c2-4).

⁹ This prefigures Aristotle’s definition in *Topics* VIII, 148b27.

¹⁰ This prefigures the circle’s definition in *Letter VII*, 342b and that of the sphere in *Timaeus* 33b.

Localization

This entire section depends on the following axiom: “Everything that is must be somewhere (*pou*)” (151a3-4, cf. 145e1). Being nowhere means not being (145e1, 162c5-7). This conclusion is inescapable in the sensible world, indicating that Parmenides has no other referent. Being somewhere means being in (*en*) something, whether in itself or in something else (138a2-3). Conversely, what is not cannot be in anything that is. It is, moreover, impossible to be in something without being enveloped (138b1), or “encircled” (cf. 138a3), as it were¹¹. The notion of place therefore implies three terms: 1) an envelope considered as a whole; 2) content considered as one or many parts; 3) and a figure, that of a circle or a sphere, allowing contacts (138a4-5). Place must be seen as related to the notion of participation, defined as “the fact of being within” (159d6-e2). In addition, since the container is considered as a circular envelope, it must have limits, as we have just seen. As soon as we accept the container as a whole and the content as one or many of its parts, we must admit as a postulate that “the greater cannot be placed in the lesser” (145d5), and therefore that the container is bigger, in size and number, than its content (150e5-151a1, cf. also 151a4-5). Accordingly, the whole must be greater than the part.

Contact¹²

The above comments can only be understood within a representation of space, parallel to the representation of time, and involving a certain number of axioms. Assimilating envelope to the place (*khôra*, cf. 148e6-8; or *hédra*, 148e5-6, e 7-8) occupied by

¹¹ With regard to the line, only one point of intersection is needed to “be within”.

¹² On contact, see Aristotle, *De gen. et corr.* I 6, 322b34 sq. and *Physics* V 3, 226b1 sq.

a thing, i.e. as its localization, raises the problem of continuity and discontinuity, which, as with number and time, only appears within the second series of deductions. However, contact implies continuity (*ephexês*) (148d). Hence these premises: 1) One thing cannot occupy two locations at the same time without losing its identity (148e-149a). 2) Being in contact means touching (138a4-5) something else, immediately following (*ephexês euthús*) something, and occupying the adjoining space (148e6-8), since it is impossible for one and the same thing to be in two places at once (149a1-2). 3) A thing cannot be in contact with itself; to do so, it would have to be not one, but two (148e-149a). 4) To touch another thing, a body must therefore be in contact with another body while remaining distinct (*khōrís*) from it; this is why contact implies three terms (149a4-6). The third term must be neither of the things that are in contact, in order to respect the first premise. Hence, in temporal terms, there is a parallelism with the instant (*exaíphnēs*). 5) Consequently, we can state the following rule: for n contacts, $(n + 1)$ terms are necessary. From all the above, it follows that what is not in contact is separate or disconnected (*khōrís*, 166b4-5)¹³.

Everything leads us to situate this deduction concerning contact here, although in the second series of deductions it is situated after the deduction concerning the similar and the dissimilar. This situation, which associates contact not with motion, as I am trying to do here, but with the question of similarity, may derive from the definition of participation that has just been evoked: “the fact of being within” (159d6-e2). Not to be in contact with

¹³The term can also be used for distinction. For example, *tò hén* remains distinct from *tautón* (139e7-140a1). There is nothing in addition to other things and the one (151a5-b1); this is why *khōrís* is equivalent to *éktos*. That is distinct from other things which are distinct from the one (159b4-5, c4, 7).

a thing means to be separated from it, and to feature no element of similarity with that other thing.

Movement

Movement (*hē kinesis*) can be defined as being in a place that is never the same (146a3-5). It is the opposite of rest. The relations between movement and change (*hē metabolē*) vary according to whether we are dealing with discontinuity or continuity. In the 6th series of deductions (162c1-2), movement is synonymous with change, while in the corollary to the second series of deductions (156d-e), change takes place in the instant, with the one passing from rest to movement or vice versa. There are two sorts of movement: displacement and alteration (138c1-2), both being corporeal.

Displacement (*hē phorá*) is defined as a change of the place (*khōra*) a thing occupies (148e7-8), with the object being first here, then there (138c5-6, d2-3, 139a1-2, cf. 146a3-5)¹⁴. Displacement can be in a straight line (138c3-6) or a circle, which involves the above-stated definitions of what is circular and straight. Circular displacement is a displacement in the same spot, around a center (138c6-8, 162d1-2). This definition is very ambiguous, since circular movement can be of several kinds, such as rolling and rotating. Only rotation constitutes a displacement in the same spot around a center. This is the type of movement the demiurge gives the universe in the *Timaeus* (34a, cf. also *Laws* X 897e-898b, and especially 898a-b). However, the expression is even more ambiguous; it is used in defining rest, as we will see. A thing in circular rotation while remaining in the same spot can be said to be at rest, even if it is moving. Displacement in a straight line

¹⁴ Aristotle, in *Physics* IV 1, 208a31-32, holds that movement is, above all, a change of place.

means being first here, then there (138d2-3, cf. 162c6-7). This type of movement concerns bodies which are not heavenly.

While displacement is a passage from one place to another, alteration is a passage from one state to another (162c2-3)¹⁵. Alteration, which is a movement (162e-163a), implies a thing becoming different from what it previously was, and that it perishes by leaving its previous state (163a6-b2). Generation and corruption are specific cases, in fact defining cases, of alteration. Hence the definition of birth as “receiving being” (156a4-5), and of death as “shedding being” (156a5-6). Birth and death mean receiving being or losing it (163c5-6). Being at rest means not being in movement, remaining in the same spot (139a8-b1, cf. also 146a1-2), remaining in itself (145e7), or remaining still (139a8-b1, 146a2-3, 162e1-2). Consequently, being at rest means not being displaced or altered (162e3-4).

With this section of the deduction concerning change, we move on to the second part of this series of deductions. The opposition one/multiple is no longer declined on the basis of the opposition whole/parts, but is based on the opposition identity/difference.

Identity/difference

Identity is not defined directly here. However, by taking what is said about similarity as a starting point, we can accept a definition of identity as possessing all the same characteristics. In fact, a thing can only be identical to itself, since being situated in different places is enough to destroy identity. Therefore, two things can be, at the most, indiscernible; they are never identical, like the leaves of a tree or, better yet, atoms.

¹⁵ The distinction between changes of place and of state can be found in *Theaetetus* 181d.

A thing must be either identical or different with regard to itself (146b2-3) and to something else (147c7-d1). But a thing can only be different from a thing that is different from itself (146c7-d1). When a thing is different from something else, it is different from something that is different from itself (146d1-2). For a thing to be neither identical nor different means either that it is part of that in relation to which it will neither be identical nor different, or that it will be like a whole in relation to a part (146b3-4). In other words, the whole/parts relation implies 1) that the parts are identical among themselves as parts of a whole, and different as parts *x, y, z*; and 2) that the whole is identical to the parts that form it, while remaining different from them, which is also true of the parts in relation to the whole.

Similarity/Dissimilarity

Similarity and dissimilarity (132d) seem to be looser forms of identity and difference (148b-d)¹⁶. For two things to be similar, it is sufficient that they share only one characteristic (147e6-148a3). “Similar is that which is affected by the character of the identical” (139e7, cf. 148a2-3) and dissimilar, “that which presents difference in relation to itself and to something else” (140a7-b1, cf. 161a7). This can be expressed in another way: “Does not being of a different species mean being of another species? And does not being of another species mean being dissimilar?” (161a7-8) As with identity and difference, the similar is similar to the similar and the dissimilar is dissimilar to the dissimilar (161b1-2). Becoming similar means assimilation, and becoming dissimilar means dissimilation (156b5-6).

This provides a table of possibilities, where it should be understood that similarity and dissimilarity are by definition

¹⁶ Cf. Aristotle’s analysis, *Metaphysics* V 9.

inseparable. In other words, resembling something in one or several aspects necessarily means being dissimilar to it in one or many other aspects. Nevertheless, for one to have no similarity to another thing means for the former to be completely separated from the latter, that is, to have no contact with it. This may be why the deduction concerning contact occurs just before this one.

Equality/Inequality

This section deals with the pair equal/unequal (140b6-d4), with inequality implying bigger or smaller (than). From this point of view, equal/unequal can be considered opposites, which is not the case with bigger and smaller. Whereas similarity and dissimilarity were equivalent to an identity or to a difference with regard to certain characteristics, equality and inequality imply an identity or a difference relative to oneself or to something else with regard to size. Nonetheless, equality does imply similarity (161c2-3). More generally, we can say (1) that equality (140b7-8) is a middle term between big(ger) and small(er) (161d5-6), and (2) that inequality implies big and small (161d1-3). In addition, what is equal is equal to an equal, and what is unequal is unequal to an unequal (161c6-7). Parmenides considers the equal/unequal pair from the point of view of the circle, which involves notions of enveloping and enveloped, and from the standpoint of the straight line, which contains a certain number of units of measure.

From the standpoint of the circle, the comparison implied in the notions of equality and inequality concerns only enveloping (151c6-d3). 1) What is bigger is that which envelopes (150e6-151a1). 2) What is smaller is that which is enveloped (151a-c). 3) What is neither bigger nor smaller, but of equal size, is equal (150d6-7). All these notions, some of which are opposites (equality/inequality) (161c6) are symmetrically inter-related. Thus: "If

it is not equal to other things, does it not necessarily result that other things are not equal to it?" (161c4-6).

From the standpoint of the line, equality or inequality (151c1-4) may be expressed in terms of units of measure, by bringing commensurability or incommensurability into play. Parmenides begins by providing definitions of equality (140b7-8, c3-5), then of inequality (bigger/smaller), within a discussion on commensurability (140b8-c2). By definition, the adjective "commensurable" (*súmmetros*) implies a common measure between two lines. Two lines can *be súmmetroi* only if the same unit of measure is used to measure both of them. If it is not possible to find a common unit of measure, we have incommensurability. Even in the case of incommensurability, the relations of equality and inequality subsist; they are simply not expressible in terms of units of measure.

Finally, if the relations of inequality and equality are not situated in being but rather in becoming, we can then refer to a process, i.e. augmentation, diminishment, or equalization.

Time

The section on time depends largely on the grammatical categories of ancient Greek. It is therefore appropriate to recall these categories. In 141d6-142a6, Parmenides envisages time, in its past, present and future dimensions, not only from the standpoint of existence but also from the standpoint of a process that has finished or is becoming. Let us now approach the issue from a cosmological standpoint. We must mention some time-related axioms, bearing in mind the corollary to the second series of deductions (155e3-157b4). This corollary is as eccentric as the section on contact (148d5-149d6), because it involves discontinuity, unlike the other series of deductions, which involve continuity.

Concerning time, we are therefore intuitively dealing with these three notions: younger, the same age, and older, which

naturally (153c2-4) always appear in this order, whether in the realm of being or of becoming. Being in or going toward inequality means being or becoming older (155c7-d1) or younger (154e3-4), and being in equality or heading in that direction means being or becoming the same age (152e4-5, 5-6). Becoming older means becoming older than one who is younger (152d6).

Being and Becoming

Participating in being means being in time (141e6-7, 152a3). There is no being but in time, just as there is no being but in space. We can only take part in being with regard to time (141e7-8), where “being” means “existing”. In this way there is no real opposite to being; not being means not existing, which has certain repercussions concerning the definition of truth. In fact, being means being “now” (157c6-d2) or “having become” (155a). Being means being in the past or in the present, while becoming means being turned towards the future; being means being at rest, becoming means being in movement. Once again we see how there are no levels of reality for Parmenides and Zeno; we are always in the sensible world, i.e. in space and time.

Knowledge and Discourse

Only that which is can be taken as an object of knowledge and discourse (142a, 155d6-e2, cf. 143a5). Hence this definition of truth: “But if we say the truth, we are clearly saying what is, are we not?” (161e5-6, cf. also 135a5-6, 133b7-c2). One consequence of this definition is the following: error is impossible, as the Sophists claimed, a consequence challenged by Plato in the *Sophist*. Be that as it may, Parmenides distinguishes several types of knowledge – science, sensation, opinion (142a4-5, 155d5-6) – but without defining them. While Parmenides links knowledge grammatically to the genitive (knowledge of + genitive), he associates discourse

with the dative (there is discourse for + dative). Denomination implies universality, since giving a name means always giving the same name to different things (147d1-e6). Parmenides also refers to the definition (142a4, 155d7-e1).

Relations with the Historical Parmenides

The interpretation I am proposing of the second part of Plato's *Parmenides* is based on the following presupposition. We must take Socrates' affirmation seriously: "You (= Parmenides) in your poem say that the universe is one (*sù ... hèn phèis ênai tò pân*), and you give splendid and excellent proofs for that; he (= Zeno), for his part, says that it is not many (*hóde dè aú ou pollá phésin ênai*) and gives a vast array of very grand proofs of his own. So, with one of you saying "one" (*tò oún tôn mèn hèn phá-nai*) and the other "not many" (*tòn dè mē pollá*), and with each of you speaking in a way that suggests that you've said nothing the same although you mean practically the same thing – what you've said you appear to have said over the heads of the rest of us". (128a8-b6). The thesis *hèn ênai tò pân* is the one Parmenides sets forth in his *Poem*, and the one Zeno defends by attacking the opposite thesis *ênai pollá* in the book he has just read aloud when the *Parmenides* begins. In what remains for us of his *Poem*, Parmenides formulates his thesis in the form of the verb *esti* "it is", without a subject and with *hén* as an attribute.

The subject of esti

In fact, one can find in fragment 8 (12-13, 19-29, 36-37) that the subject of *esti* must be *tò eón*, that is, *tò ón*. The question then arises of what this noun, discouraging in its generality, refers to. Since we are in a pre-Platonic perspective, where the distinction between sensible thing and intelligible reality has not yet been made, and in view of Plato's testimony in the *Parmenides*, I have

chosen to supply *tò pân*, that is, the universe, or everything that surrounds us, as the referent of *tò ón*.

In a very clear and well-argued critique, Denis O'Brien¹⁷ points out that the *noun pân* accompanied by the article *tò* is not to be found in the *Poem*; the term only appears in the form of an epithet (8, 24; 9, 3). As I have already said, it cannot be known whether the formulation *tò pân* did not appear in the rest of the *Poem*. Yet O'Brien's argument is based on an implicit presupposition: *tò pân* is associated with the multiplicity opposed to unity, which makes *tò pân* shift in the direction of Empedocles, for Parmenides refuses all multiplicity to the path of being. Here lies the true problem.

All interpreters are, unbeknownst to them, victims of the Neoplatonic reading by Simplicius. No one, of course, still believes, as Simplicius did, that the path of being corresponds to the Platonic intelligible, whereas the opinion of mortals refers to the sensible. Today, however, the cosmological passages are referred to the constitution of the universe, by opposing them to the ontological passages that are supposed to describe its mysterious foundations, a background-world not yet defined as the intelligible by Plato. Here resides the cause of the fascination provoked by the thought of Parmenides.

Throughout his entire *Poem*, Parmenides always talks about the same thing: being (*tò ón*), that is, the universe (*tò pân*). Yet he considers this universe in two aspects: on the one hand as such, and on the other as it appears to us. All modern cosmologists are confronted by the same problem. The description of phenomena

¹⁷ O'Brien, Denis, «Le Parménide historique et le Parménide de Platon», in *Plato's Parmenides. Proceedings of the Fourth Symposium Platonicum Pragense* ed. A. Havlicek and F. Karfik, 234-256 (Prague: Oikoymenh, 2005).

by physics is not valid for the entire universe: this is why the relevance of cosmology was rejected by Kantians and rationalists.

However, a comparison between the *Poem* and the second part of Plato's *Parmenides* (see table, p. 84f) manifests several points of contact. We do not, of course, have to do with a cosmology based on light and darkness, like that found in the last verses of fragment 8 and the following fragments; but it is an inventory of the conceptual instruments intended to develop a cosmology concerning appearances, and not from the viewpoint of the being constituted by the universe. The subject of *esti*, which I take to be the universe (*tò pân*), is alone and whole of limb (8, 4); it is both limited and unlimited, probably because it has the form of a sphere that extends in every direction toward its circumference (8, 42-44); it remains in place (8, 29-30); it is immobile and at rest (8, 4; 26-28; 38); it remains identical (8, 29), hence similar (8, 22) and equal (8, 49) to itself. Since it is not in time, it is unengendered and imperishable (8, 2-3; 5-6; 6-7; 9-10; 13-15; 21-26; 36-28). It is (8, 11), and that is why one can think and talk about it (8, 7-9; 35-36). These parallels between Parmenides' *Poem* and the second part of Plato's *Parmenides*, are striking, to say the least.

The attributes of esti

Most translators and interpreters of Plato's *Parmenides* place *hén* in the subject position. This is quite natural, owing to the immense influence of Proclus' famous commentary on the *Parmenides*, which carried out a synthesis of the Neoplatonic interpretations since Plotinus. The Neoplatonists considered the One beyond being as the principle of all things, and beginning with Iamblichus, the origin of all the classes of gods was seen in this One. Two other interpretations had been developed before this one: a logical or dialectical interpretation, which held the second part of the *Parmenides* to be an exercise in Aristotelian

logic or Platonic dialectic, and an ontological interpretation, which considered *tò hén* as the form of the One. However, in the second part of the *Parmenides*, being can only be present in space and in time, which renders these two interpretations completely impossible. In addition, trying to give as the subject of *esti* either the One beyond being or the Form of the One clashes with an entire cosmological vocabulary that is valid for the sensible world, but certainly not for the Intelligible, nor, above all, for the principle beyond being. To escape this difficulty, one must have recourse to allegory. This is why *hén* must be read in the position of an attribute, not a subject.

There remains the objection that the formulation “you suppose the universe is one” (cf. 128a8-b1) contradicts the program described by Parmenides in the following terms: “Shall I hypothesize about the one itself and consider what the consequences must be, if it is one or if it is not one.” (137b3-4). This latter phrase clearly shows, it is objected, that the subject of *esti* in the rest of the text is indeed *tò hén*, not the world.

I have two remarks to make on this essential point. On the one hand, as was the case for *tò ón*, Denis O’Brien, the most perceptive critic, does not give an opinion on the definition, and hence the role and the status of *tò hén*. He limits himself to declaring: “The one of the second part of the *Parmenides* is the one as such”. I do not understand what that means, because the formulation is too general. Yet there is a more serious problem.

At 137b3-4, I do not interpret the following phrase in the same way as Denis O’Brien: *perì toû hendò autoû hupothémenos*. The translation O’Brien proposes of *perì toû hendò autoû hupothémenos, eite hén estin eite mē hén tí khrē sumbainein sumbaínein* is the following: “with regard to the one itself, laying down as a hypothesis, either if it is one or else if it is not one, what must follow therefrom”. O’Brien suggests that the syntax forces us to

consider that *perì toû henòs autoû* necessarily implies that *tò hén* is the subject of the *estin* that follows in *eite hén estin eíte mē hén*. I admit that the syntax allows the interpretation suggested by Denis O'Brien, but I deny that it excludes the other interpretation I have proposed, i.e. that *hén* is the attribute of *estin*, whose subject must be understood from 128a8-b1 to be *tò pân*. The distance makes no difference, because Parmenides has just specified that this is his hypothesis, the one Socrates attributes to him at 128a8-b1, without any reaction on the part of Parmenides. Hence my translation: "[I begin by myself and by my own hypothesis], making it deal (*hupothémenos*) with the one itself (*perì toû henòs autoû*); 'if it is one' and 'if it is not one', what must be the result?" In this case, *perì toû henòs autoû* no longer implies that *tò hén* is the subject of *eite hén estin eíte mē hén*. This means that Parmenides will make his hypothesis concern a precise predicate: *hén*. Consequently, as I remarked in a note to my translation, the lines I have just translated are parallel to 136a5-8 and are no longer in contradiction with 128a8-b1. In all the cases discussed here, we find the ambiguity attached to the term "unity": uniqueness or simplicity. I have adopted a position and justified it, but Denis O'Brien refuses to do so.

Finally, as I said in the Introduction to my translation of the *Parmenides*, when *hén* is taken up as a noun accompanied by the definite article *tò* in such formulations as *tò hén*, *tò mē hén*, and even *tò mē ón hén*, we must understand that the one designated in this way is the one the hypothesis is talking about, i.e. the one that is the world, which is one.

CNRS – Paris (Villejuif)
 transl. Michael Chase

Structure of the second series of deductions

one / many

whole / parts

limited / unlimited

number

figure: straight / circular

located in something else / in itself

contact

at rest / in movement

identity / difference

similar / dissimilar

in contact / not in contact

same age / different age

existence

knowledge, language

The sections in Parmenides' Poem

	1
One / many	alone 8, 4
Whole / parts	whole of limb 8, 4; since Fate has bound to be whole and entire 8, 37-38
Limited / unlimited	unendable 8, 4; Necessity holds it in the chain of a limit 8, 31; And so, since there is a furthest limit, it is, 8, 42
Numbers	alone 8, 4
Figure	And so, since there is a furthest limit, it is, from every direction, complete, like the bulk of a well-rounded sphere, from the centre stretching out equally in all direction 8, 42-44
Localization	Staying both the same and in the same place, it lies by itself and stays thus fixedly on the same spot 8, 29-30

Rest/movement	unshaking 8, 4; And so, without movement, in the bonds of great chains, it is without beginning and without ending, since coming into being and destruction have been driven right away, and true conviction has flung them afar 8, 26-28; without movement 8,38
Identity / difference	Staying both the same (8, 29)
Similarity / dissimilarity	And it is not divisible either, since it is, all of it alike (<i>homoion</i>) 8, 6; For neither is there not-being, which would stop it arriving at sameness (<i>eis homón</i>) with itself (8, 46-47)
In contact / not in contact	For neither is there not-being, which would stop it arriving at sameness (<i>eis homón</i>) with itself, nor is there being, such that there would be more of being in one place and less in some other place, since it is, all of it inviolate (8, 46-48)
Equality / inequality (space)	For it must be neither in any way larger nor in any way smaller, in one place rather than in any other place (8, 44-45); For being, from every direction, equal to itself, it comes up to its limits uniformly on every side (8, 49)
Equality / inequality (time)	On this way, there are very many signs to show that, being unborn, it is also imperishable (8, 2-3); It was not at one time only, nor will it be at one time only, since it is now, all of it together, one, continuous (8, 5-6); Besides, what possible need could have urged it, having started from nothing, to be born later rather than before? (8, 9-10); For what origin will you look for it? Where would it have increased to? Where would it have increased from? (8, 6-7); That is why Justice did not allow to come into being or to pass away, slackening her grip on her bonds but holds fast (8, 13-15); So coming into being has been snuffed out; and destruction likewise lost without trace (8, 21); And so without movement, in the bonds of great chains, it is without beginning and without ending, since coming into being and destruction have been driven right away, and true conviction has flung them afar (8, 26-28)
Being and becoming	It must either be altogether, or not be at all (8, 11)
Knowledge and discourses	I shall not let you say nor think that it comes out of not-being, for it cannot be said, nor thought, than «is not» (8, 7-9); It is the same to think and our thinking that is. For you will not find thinking without the being in which the thinking has been given expression (8, 35-36)

The sections in each series of deductions

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
One/many	137c3-4	[143a5- -145a4]	157c2-3	159b4- d3			164c6- d7; d7-e3	165e3- 166b3
Whole/ parts	137c4- d3	142c6- d8	157c3- -158b1	159d4-6			165a5- c5	
Limit/ unlimited	137d4-7	142d8- -143d1	158b1- d7					
Numbers		143d1- -145a4		159 d6-e2				
Figure	136d7- -138a1	145a4- -145b4						
Localization	138a2- b6	145b5- -145e5			162a5-7			
Rest/ movement	138b7- -139b3	145e6- 146a7			162b8- 163b5	163d1- e6	165d5-6	
Identity/ difference	139b4- e5	146a8- 147b8		159e3-4	160d5- e2	164a2-6	165c7- 8, d2-3	166b4- c1
Similarity/ dissimilar- ity	139e6- -140b5	147c1- -148d4	158e1- 159a5	159e3- 160a3	161a6- c1	164a2-6	165c6- d3	166b3-4
Contact/or not		148d5- -149d6					165d4-5	166b5
Equality/ inequality (space)	140b6- d7	149d7- 151e2			161c1- e2	163e6- 164a1	164e3- 165a5	
Equality/ inequality (time)	140e1- -141d5	151e3- 155c7						
Being and becoming	141d6- -142a1	155c7- d4			161e2- 162b7	163c1- d1		166c1-2
Knowledge and dis- course	142a1- b1	155d4- -155e2						