

Theory and History of Ontology (ontology.co) by Raul Corazzon | e-mail: rc@ontology.co

A Selection of Critical Studies on the Poem of Parmenides

Contents of this Section

Heraclitus and Parmenides

This part of the section [History of Ontology](#) includes the following pages:

The Thought of Heraclitus

Heraclitus and the Question of the One and the Many (under construction)

The Thought of Parmenides

[Parmenides and the Question of Being in Greek Thought](#)

Critical Notes on His Fragments (Diels Kranz fr. 1-3) (Current page)

[Critical Editions and translations](#)

Annotated bibliography of studies on Parmenides in English:

[A - B](#)

[C - De L](#)

[De R - Grae](#)

[Grah - Ion](#)

[Jac- Lou](#)

[Mac - Mou](#)

[Mou - Rav](#)

[Rei - Sor](#)

[Spa - Vol](#)

[Wac - Z](#)

Bibliographies on Parmenides in other languages:

[Bibliographie des études en Français A - E](#)

[Bibliographie des études en Français F - Z](#)

[Bibliografia degli studi in Italiano](#)

[Indici dei volumi della collana Eleatica](#)

[Bibliographie der Studien auf Deutsch](#)

[Bibliografía de estudios en Español](#)

[Bibliografia de estudos em Português](#)

Index of the Section: Ancient Philosophy from the Presocratics to the Hellenistic Period



[Annotated bibliography of the studies in English: Complete PDF Version on the website Academia.edu](#)

Fr. B1: The Proem

Our only source for the verses 1-28 is Sextus Empiricus, *Against the logicians*, VII, 111; verses 29-30 are also contained in Simplicius *Commentary on De Caelo (On Aristotle's 'On the heavens')* book III, p. 557, 20 ff.; Simplicius is the only source for the verses 31-32).

Sextus gives the most ancient commentary on Parmenides' Proem (op. cit. VII, 112-114):

"(112) In these words Parmenides is saying that the "mares" that carry him are the non-rational impulses and desires of the soul, and that it is reflection in line with philosophical reason that is conveyed along "the famed road of the goddess". This reason, like a divine escort, leads the way to the knowledge of all things. His "girls" that lead him forward are the senses. And of these, he hints at the ears in saying "for it was being pressed forward by two rounded wheels," that is the round part of the ears, through which they receive sound. (113) And he calls the eyes "daughters of Night," leaving the "house of Night," "pushed into the light" because there is no use for them without light. And coming upon "much-punishing" Justice that "holds the corresponding keys" is coming upon thought, which holds safe the apprehensions of objects. (114) And she receives him and then promises to teach the following two things: "both the stable heart of persuasive Truth," which is the

immovable stage of knowledge, and also "the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true trust" -- that is, everything that rests on opinion, because it is insecure. And at the end he explains further the necessity of not paying attention to the senses but to reason. For he says that you must not "let habit, product of much experience, force you along this road to direct an unseeing eye and echoing ear and tongue, but judge by reason the argument, product of much experience, that is spoken by me". So he too, as is evident from what has been said, proclaimed knowledgeable reason as the standard of truth in the things that there are, and withdrew from attention to the senses." (pp. 24-25)

From: Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, Translated and edited by Richard Bett, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005.

"The fragments of Parmenides are an important monument of Greek poetry at the end of the sixth or the beginning of the fifth century B.C. In time they cannot be far removed from Pindar's Pythian x, which was written in 498, or from his Pythians VI and XII, which were written in 490. With these flights of lyrical genius the poem has little in common, but it belongs to the same age, and it has suffered from being too often considered either in isolation as a contribution to truth or as an episode in purely philosophical poetry. But it presents questions to the literary critic which have little direct relation to its metaphysics; and particularly in the Proem Parmenides attempts a manner of writing so unusual that it is easy to dismiss it as an eccentricity of a philosopher attempting a task for which nature had not equipped him. But Parmenides was a careful and singularly exact writer, and the composition of his Proem no doubt cost him as much pains as the exposition of reality which it precedes. In it he had something to say of great importance, and he adopted a remarkable method to which Greek poetry presents hardly any parallel. The origins of his method have been studied, but a knowledge of them does not explain either what he meant to say or what his contemporaries would see in his words. If we can understand what the Proem meant in the thought of his time, we may perhaps understand better how Parmenides viewed his calling as a philosopher.(1)

Diels was surely right in assuming that behind Parmenides' Proem there lies a considerable literature which has almost entirely disappeared. There were certainly poems which described descents into hell,(2) and there may have been poems which described ascents into heaven, although the evidence for them is scanty and the story of Empedotimus, told by Servius, *ad Georg.* I. 34, cannot be pressed, since its date is not known. But even if such ascents had a poetry of their own, it seems to be quite different from that of Parmenides. For these poets surely told of such adventures as facts which they expected to be taken as literally true. When Epimenides told of his converse with nymphs in a cave, he stated what he claimed to be a fact.' It could be believed or disbelieved, but there was no question of allegory or symbolism. But Parmenides is plainly allegorizing. The allegory may of course be based on something akin to a mystical experience, but it is none the less an allegory. The transition from Night to Day is the transition from ignorance to knowledge; the Sun-maidens who accompany the poet are the powers in him which strain toward the light; the horses who know the road are his own impulses towards truth; the way on which he travels is the way of inquiry. The allegory is revealed as soon as the goddess begins to speak. For then the way with its three different branches becomes the ways of truth, of not-being, and of opinion. The allegory breaks down when the poet gets to his real task, and we may be certain that till then Parmenides is not giving the literal record of a spiritual adventure but clothing his search for truth in an allegorical dress.

Parmenides' Proem may be called allegorical because it has two meanings--the superficial meaning which tells a story and the implied meaning which gives the essential message of the poet. He tells of a chariot journey through gates to a goddess, but what he really describes is the transition from ignorance to knowledge. The use of allegory on such a scale is extremely rare in early Greek poetry. The first signs of it may be detected in Homer's account of the *Aitiai*(2) and in Hesiod's steep path which leads to *Arethé*.(3) But in neither of these is much added to the essential facts by the allegorical dress, and in both the allegory is closely related to traditional mythology." (pp. 97-99)

Notes

(1) Cf. especially H. Diels, *Parmenides Lehrgedicht* (Berlin, 1897); J. Dorfner, *Die Eleaten und die Orphiker* (Prog. Freistadt, 1911); W. Kranz, *Über Aufbau und Bedeutung des Parmenideischen Gedichtes* (Berlin, 1916).

(2) The question of such poetry is discussed by E. Norden in his *Aeneis*, VI, esp. 1-10. He is primarily concerned with Orpheus in his notes on vss. 120, 264 ff., 384-416, 548- 627, and with Heracles on vss. 131 ff., 260, 309-12, 384-416, 477-93, 538-627, 666-78.

(3) I. 502 ff.

From: Cecil Bowra, "The Proem of Parmenides," *Classical Philology* 32, 1937, pp. 97-112.

Reprinted in: C. Bowra, *Problems in Greek Poetry*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953, pp. 38-53.

Fr. B2: The Ways of Enquiry

"Then what roads of enquiry can be thought of? [Fragment B 2] mentions two roads: Road (A) is described in line 3, and proved by line 4 to be the Way of Truth; Road (B) is the 'track beyond all tidings', delineated in line 5. [B 6]. 3-4 also mentions two roads: Road (C), described in lines 4-9, is that 'along which mortals . . . wander', and it is therefore the Way of Opinion. The 'first road' of line 3 also has pitfalls (for the goddess 'restrains' Parmenides from it); and it cannot therefore be identical with Road (A), the Way of Truth. Now lines 1-2 contain the end of an argument concerned with this 'first road' ; and, as I shall show, it is plausible to find the beginning of the argument in [B 2] 7-8, which starts to recount the horrors of the 'track beyond all tidings'. If that is so, then the 'first road' of [B 6] is identical with Road (B); and in consequence Road (B), the 'track beyond all tidings', is not the Way of Opinion.

[B 2] and [B 6] show Parmenides at a crossroads, faced by three possible paths of inquiry: (A) the Way of Truth; (B) the 'track beyond all tidings' and (C) the Way of Opinion. (8) The first duty of the goddess is to characterize those three roads in a logically perspicuous fashion. Road (A) maintains 'both that it is (*esti*) and that it is not for not being' (B2. 3) ; (9) Road (B) maintains 'both that it is not and that it is necessary for it not to be' (B2. 5); Road (C) is not explicitly described in comparable terms, but must have maintained 'both that it is and that it is not' (cf. [B 6.8]).

The three roads are thus distinguished by means of the word '*esti*', 'it is'. Both the sense of the verb and the identity of its subject are matters of high controversy. Since they are also vital to any interpretation of Parmenides' argument, we cannot burke the issue. I begin by asking what is the sense of the verb '*einai*' as Parmenides uses it here. The classification of the different 'senses', or 'uses', of the verb '*einai*' is a delicate task, abounding in linguistic and philosophical difficulties; (10) and my remarks will be crude and superficial. Nevertheless, something must be said.

We can distinguish between a complete and an incomplete use of '*einai*': sometimes a sentence of the form '*X esti*' expresses a complete proposition; sometimes *esti* occurs in sentences of the form '*X esti Y*' (or the form '*X esti*' is elliptical for '*X esti Y*'). In its complete use, '*einai*' sometimes has an existential sense: '*ho theos esti*' is the Greek for 'god exists'; '*ouk esti kentauros*' means 'Centaurs do not exist'. In its incomplete use, '*einai*' often serves as a copula, and the use is called predicative: '*Sokrates esti sophos*' is Greek for 'Socrates is wise'; '*hoi leontes ouk eisin hemeroi*' means 'Lions are not tame'. Many scholars think that Parmenides' original sin was a confusion, or fusion, of the existential with the predicative '*einai*'; and they believe that the characterization of the three roads in [B 2] catches Parmenides *in flagrante delicto*. If we ask what sense '*esti*' has in line 3, the answer is disappointing: '*esti*' attempts, hopelessly, to combine the two senses of 'exists' and 'is Y'. (11) Now I do not wish to maintain that Parmenides was conscious of the distinction between an existential and a predicative use of '*einai*'; credit for bringing that distinction to philosophical consciousness is usually given to Plato. But I do reject the claim that [B 2] fuses or confuses the two uses of the verb. I see no reason to impute such a confusion to the characterization of the three roads; for I see no trace of a predicative 'is' in that characterization. The point can be simply supported: Road (B) rules out '*X is not*'; if we read 'is' predicatively, we must suppose Parmenides to be abjuring all negative predications. to be spurning all sentences of the form '*X is not F*'. Such a high-handed dismissal of negation is absurd; it is suggested by nothing in Parmenides' poem; and it is adequately outlawed by such lines as B 8.22, which show Parmenides happy to accept formulae of the form '*X is not F*'. (12) '*esti*', in the passages we are concerned with, is not a copula.

Then is '*esti*' existential? Aristotle distinguishes what has been called a 'veridical' use of '*esti*'; '*X esti*', in this use, is complete, and '*esti*' means . . . is the case' or . . . is true'. If Socrates asserts that cobblers are good at making shoes, his interlocutor may reply '*esti tauta*', 'Those things are' or 'That's true'. It has been suggested that Parmenides' complete '*esti*' is veridical, not existential.

That suggestion can be accommodated, I think, to [B 2] and [B 6]; but the accommodation is not easy, nor (as far as I can see) does it have any philosophical merit. In any event, the suggestion breaks on the rocks of B 8: in that fragment, Parmenides sets himself to infer a number of properties of X from the premiss that X *esti*. None of those properties consists with the veridical reading of 'esti': the very first inference is that X is ungenerated; and if it is not, strictly speaking, impossible to take 'X' in 'X is ungenerated' to stand for the sort of propositional entity of which veridical 'esti' is predicable, it is grossly implausible to do so, and the implausibility mounts to giant proportions as the inferences of B 8 proceed. Since the inferences in B 8 are tied to the 'esti' of [B 2] and [B 6], the veridical reading of *esti* in those fragments can only be maintained at the cost of ascribing to Parmenides a confusion between veridical and non-veridical *einai*. And I see no reason for making that derogatory ascription. (13)

Existential 'einai' remains. The obvious and the orthodox interpretation of 'esti' in [B 2] and [B 6] is existential; and that interpretation is felicitous: it does not perform the impossible task of presenting Parmenides with a set of doctrines which are true, but it does give Parmenides a metaphysical outlook which is intelligible, coherent and peculiarly plausible. I shall continue to translate Parmenides' 'einai' by 'be'; but I shall paraphrase it by 'exist'.

Road (A) thus says that 'it exists', *esti*. Scholars have naturally raised the question of what exists: what is Parmenides talking about? what is the logical subject of 'esti'? Some have denied the appropriateness of the question, urging that we need no more ask after the subject of 'esti' than we do after 'huet', 'it is raining'. I find that suggestion perfectly incomprehensible. (14) Nevertheless, the spirit behind it is sound: 'esti' need not have a logical subject. For in general, we can make sense of a sentence of the form 'it ϕ s' in either of two ways: first, we may find a determinate reference for 'it', so that 'it ϕ s' is understood as '*a* ϕ s'. ('How is your motor car?' -- 'It's working again'.) Here we do look for a logical subject and we expect to find it, explicit or implicit, in the immediate context. Second, 'it ϕ s' may be the consequent of a conditional or a relative sentence: 'If you buy a machine, look after it'; 'Whatever machine you buy, something will go wrong with it'. In ordinary discourse, the antecedent is often not expressed: 'What will you do if you catch a fish? -- Eat it'. Here there is no question of finding a logical subject for the predicate ' ϕ s': 'it' does not name or refer to any particular individual.

One standard view gives 'esti' in [B 2].3 a logical subject: that subject is 'Being'; and Road (A) asserts, bluntly, that Being exists. I am at a loss to understand that assertion; what in the world can be meant by 'Being exists'? Nevertheless, behind abstract Being there lurks a more concrete candidate for the post of logical subject: '*to eon*', 'what is': should we gloss 'esti' as 'what is, is'? (15) Phrases of the form 'what ϕ s' do not always serve as logical subjects: 'what ϕ s' may mean 'whatever ϕ s' ('What's done cannot be undone'); and then 'what ϕ s ψ s' means 'for any x: if x ϕ s, x ψ s'. Thus we might gloss Parmenides' 'esti' by 'what is, is', and yet deny that 'what is' is a logical subject; for we might explain the phrase by '*whatever is, is*'. Road (A), on that view, maintains that whatever exists exists and cannot not exist. It has been objected to that interpretation that Parmenides attempts to prove that Road (A) is right, and Roads (B) and (C) mistaken; but that the interpretation makes (A) tautologous, and hence in no need of proof, and (B) and (C) contradictory, and hence in no need of disproof. But the objection is doubly mistaken: first, tautologies can, and sometimes should, be proved; and contradictions can, and sometimes should, be disproved. Second, Road (A) does not turn out tautologous; since it is far from a tautology that what exists *cannot not exist*.

'What ϕ s' may mean 'the thing that ϕ s', and serve as a logical subject. Thus '*to eon*' may mean 'the thing which exists'. Then Road (A) maintains that the thing that exists -- 'the One' or 'the Whole' or 'Nature' -- exists and cannot not exist. It has been objected to that interpretation that Parmenides proceeds in B 8 to prove that the subject of his poem is One; and that he can hardly have intended to prove the tautology that 'the One is one'. Again, the objection is weak: first, Parmenides may have tried to prove a tautology; second, it is far from clear that Parmenides ever does try to prove that the subject of his poem is One; and thirdly, it is not clear that it is tautologous to say that 'the Whole' or 'Nature' or 'Reality' is one.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that '*to eon*', on either interpretation, is a likely supplement to Parmenides' *esti*. The reason is simple: nothing in the context of [B 2] could reasonably suggest to even the most careful reader that by 'it is' Parmenides meant 'what is, is'. The term 'what is' does not appear in B 1 or in [B 2]; and it is not the sort of term a reader would naturally supply for himself. (16)

A close investigation of the context of [B 2] has supplemented 'esti' in a different way: instead of 'what is', supply 'what can be thought of or 'what can be known'. Road (A) then says that 'what can

be thought of exists'; and 'Parmenides' real starting-point is . . . the possibility of rational discourse' or of thought. (17) My objection to that suggestion is a weaker version of my objection to 'to eon': nothing in the introductory context of [B 2] suggests such a supplement for 'esti' at line 3; reflexion on the subsequent argument may indeed lead us to 'what can be thought of', but it will also lead us to berate Parmenides for a gratuitously roundabout and allusive way of expressing himself; for the most careful reader, on this view, will only understand the crucial lines of [B 2] after he has read a quantity of later verses.

Nonetheless, the philosophical advantages of the interpretation are considerable; and we may well be loth to abandon the spectacle of a Parmenides who investigates, in Kantian fashion, the implications of rationality. We can retain the advantages and avoid the objection by modifying the interpretation slightly. I suggest the following paraphrase for lines 1-3: 'I will tell you . . . the different conceivable ways of inquiring into something -- the first assumes that it exists and cannot not exist . . .' In the paraphrase, 'it' has an explicit antecedent, and 'inquiring into' has an explicit object: viz. the word 'something'. In the Greek text there is no explicit subject for 'esti' and no explicit object of 'dizêsios' ('inquiry'). Subject and object must both be supplied, and nothing is easier than to make this double task one: the implicit object of 'dizêsios' is the implicit subject of 'esti'. 'Of the ways of inquiring [about any given object], the first assumes that [the object, whatever it may be] exists.' (Chapter IX: *Parmenides and the Objects of Inquiry*, pp. 125-128 of the 1982 edition)

Notes

(8) The reference of *tautês* in [B6] .3 has caused some difficulty (see especially Stokes [1971], 112-15); but as far as I can see that word refers simply enough to the Road discussed in [B2] and [B6].1-2 (see Cornford [1933], 99-100).

(9) The second half of [B2].3 is syntactically ambiguous: the *esti in ouk esti me einai* may be either 'personal' or 'impersonal' ('It is not for not being' or 'It is not possible for it not to be'). Line 5 proves that the sense is: 'It cannot not be'; and I take it that either syntax will yield that sense.

(10) See especially Kahn [1973]; there is a useful table on p. 82 presenting a summary classification of the roles played by *einai*.

(11) Eudemus, fr. 43 Wehrli = A 28, says that the Eleatics ignore different uses of *einai*; but the Peripatetic and the modern accusations are quite distinct. Furth [1968] maintains that the notions of existence and of the copula are 'impacted or fused in the early Greek concept of being' (243). He cites no evidence; and he does not explain the difference between fusion and confusion. Kahn [1973], 320-3, argues that existential *einai* -- his Type VI -- was invented in the fifth century; but I cannot distinguish Type VI from the early Type I.

(12) ' . . . negative judgments (*hoi apophatikoi logoi*), as Parmenides says, fit principles and limits' (Scholiast to Euclid, A 22a in Untersteiner [1958]'s edition); but the sense and reliability of the report are uncertain.

(13) The veridical use of *einai* is discussed in Kahn [1966], and applied to Parmenides in Kahn [1968]. Kahn's view is complicated by the fact that he maintains first that the veridical use of *einai* involves both the existential and the predicative uses ([Kahn 1968], 712), and second, that Parmenides' *esti* means both 'it is the case' and 'it exists' (ibid., 336). Mourelatos [1970], ch. 2 and Appendix 2, claims to follow Kahn; but he says that *esti* is the 'is' of 'speculative predication' (predication which gives insight into the identity of something or says what it is). That is not a special sense of *esti*; nor can I give any account of the three Roads in terms of it. Holscher [1969], 79 and 98, holds that *esti* is neither existential nor predicative: it means 'seiend sein', 'Bestand haben', 'wahr sein'. Jones [1973], 290-1, thinks that Parmenides is proposing a new sense of *einai*, which he explains in [B3]. None of these modern suggestions has any linguistic or interpretative plausibility; and none is worth considering unless there are grave objections to the existential construe of *esti*.

(14) Some scholars talk vaguely of an 'indefinite' subject. Loenen [1959], 12-14, emends line 3 to read: . . . *hopôs esti ti kai hôs* . . . ('that something (*ti*) is . . .'). Untersteiner [1958], LXXV-XC, takes the subject of *esti* to be he [*hodos*], 'the one [road]'; and 156.17-18 supports the suggestion. But that gives Parmenides grammar at the cost of sense.

(15) Reinhardt [1916], 60, supposes a lost line before [B2] in which Parmenides refers to *to eon*; Cornford [1939], 30, n. 2, emends line 3 to read: *Hê men hopôs eon esti* . . .

(16) Tugendhat [1970], 137, says that 'what Parmenides is dealing with is that (i.e. "the Whole") which previous philosophers had always dealt with'; so that the philosophically educated reader will grasp the subject of the poem at once (cf. Verdenius [1942], 32: Verdenius, 73-5, argues that the poem was explicitly entitled *Concerning Nature*). The Milesians had indeed described the universe as a whole; but they had not, in any very obvious sense, made statements about 'the Whole'.

(17) See especially Owen [1960]; I quote from Stokes [1971], 119-22.

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From: Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, London: Routledge Kegan Paul 1979; revised edition in one volume 1982.

"What is declared to exist in B 2 is simply what can be talked or thought about; for the proof of its existence is that, if it did not exist, it could not be talked or thought about. (On our version of B 6. 1-2 the subject comes into the open there: *to legein te noein t'eon.*) (50) And it needs no proving that the subject of the argument can be talked and thought about, for we are talking and thinking about it. Hence indeed the temptation to say that the *éstin* has no subject; for Parmenides' argument need assume nothing save that we are thinking and talking of something, and this seems to be guaranteed by our framing or following the argument at all. The subject is quite formal, until it is filled in with the attributes (beginning with existence) that are deduced for it; and because this seems to reduce to the vacuous discovery that the subject is just the subject, it is as tempting as it is certainly illogical and misleading to say that there is no subject at all.

Is this too small a mouse from the mountain? Philosophically it seems more like the giant that Parmenides' successors thought it. The comparison with Descartes' *cogito* is inescapable: both arguments cut free of inherited premisses, both start from an assumption whose denial is peculiarly self-refuting. This seems sufficient to establish that Parmenides does not, in the sense described, rest his argument on assumptions derived from earlier cosmologists. To me it seems sufficient to establish him as the most radical and conscious pioneer known to us among the Presocratics." (*Logic, Science, and Dialectic. Collected Papers in Greek Philosophy*, pp. 15-16)

Notes

(50) [Lest this mislead, it must be emphasized that the problem has never been to supply a *grammatical* subject for the *έστιν* and *οὐκ έστιν* of B 2 (save for emendators such as Cornford and Loenen), for there is sufficient evidence that, at the start of the argument at least, Parmenides is prepared to dispense with one. The problem is to decide what must be supposed true, from the start,

of whatever it is that Parmenides exhibits in the course of his argument as existing without beginning or end or change or plurality. I argue that this subject must simply be what can be spoken and thought of (told forth, picked out in speech -- (φραζειν, λεγειν, φατιζειν, cf. the contrasted ανωνυμον, B 8. 17; distinguished and grasped in thought -- γινώσκειν, νοειν). For one reviewer this still left the subject too 'definite' (Kerferd, *Classical Review* 1961, 26), and one can only ask what it would be to have a more indefinite subject than one which can merely be thought and spoken of: which of these attributes would it lack, and what nonsense would result? Another scholar, by contrast, found such an account of the subject 'rarefied and abstract' (A.P.D. Mourelatos, *The Route o Parmenides* (New Haven 1970), xiv) but himself proposed to translate the tatty and ouk éstin as '-- is --' and '-- is not --', 'with blanks in both the subject and the predicate place' (ibid. 55).] But those who wish to set his poem inside an orthodox cosmological tradition have one prop left to rest on: the spherical universe, whose appearance is the outcome of the whole argument."

(51) 'In the sense described': I am not of course denying that some of the ideas employed in the course of the argument may have been inherited from earlier theorists. This must be true of some of the cosmogony, and probably of at least the idea of πειρας in the Αλήθεια (see the third section of the paper).

From: Gwilym Ellis Lane Owen, "Eleatic Questions", *Classical Quarterly*: 1960, pp.84-102; reprinted with additions in: D. J. Furley and R. E. Allen, *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*. Vol. II: *The Eleatics and Pluralists*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1975, pp. 48-81 and in: G. E. L. Owen, *Logic, Science, and Dialectic. Collected Papers in Greek Philosophy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1986, pp. 3-26.

Fr. B3: Thinking and Being

...τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι.

"As examples of semiotic analysis I have selected classical and, as far as possible, non-problematic older texts from the tradition on which our philosophy is founded, that is, the Greek tradition. Their clarity is a function of the non-ambiguity of translations, which is, of course, always relative since it itself is already an interpretation; in fact, variations in translation appear in our own language, as philosophical or any other dictionaries reveal (by the enumeration of synonyms and homonyms). Polysemy can be substantially reduced by investigating the context and comprehending the meaning as defined, on the whole, by the tension between context and situation -- to the extent, of course, that we are able to comprehend the situation.

For a first example I have chosen a sentence from Parmenides, fragment 3: *to gar auto noein estin to kai einai*, translated by Diels: *denn (das Seiende) denken und sein ist dasselbe*; by W. Capelle: *Denn (nur) ein und dasselbe kann gedacht werden und sein*; and by E. Cassirer: *Dasselbe ist Denken und Sein*.(3)

If we look at the syntactic side of semantic analysis, we see that everyone connects to-- *auto* and *noein* -- *einai* by means of *estin* and that the translations in general do not differ greatly, at least at first glance, with regard to the "sense," despite the fact that some translators insert words expanding the original text, and in so doing, already direct the interpretation. Let us suppose that we now choose the simplest translation, Cassirer's "it is the same to think and to be" and that we first examine without further interpretation those syntactic aspects of the texts which are important in determining the meaning. The most important is *estin*. Here logical syntax distinguishes three possibilities which could be illustrated by the following examples: (a) $1 + 1 = 2$, (b) the crow is black, (c) ice is water. The first means a complete "identity" and tautology; in fact, the sentence can be reversed. The second case is an "inclusion" of a subclass; the crow is included in the class of black things. The third case represents an "identity" with regard to the third thing (the physical substance). Now, we can ask which case is applicable to the sentence: "It is the same to think and to be." The word "is" is semantically determined by the modifier "same," which would point to the first case, to a complete identity (thought = existence). Let us suppose that we accept this result; the question now is whether in such a case the "sense" is given without any ambiguity. How did

Parmenides understand it and what did he mean by it? What did he want to say through this fundamental thesis of his? Is it meant subjectively (I think = I am), or, perhaps, in an objectivist sense as with Hegel, or is it meant in another, different way? What meanings did the words "to think" and "to be" have for Parmenides in his situation? Do we understand something similar by our own words in our own situation?

Neither syntax nor simple lexical semantics helps us here. We must study the whole of the context and especially passages worded identically and probably having identical meaning or intention.

Hence we reach for the nearest sentence that seems to express the same thing or to clarify the first text. In Diels we read in fragment 8, verse 34: *t'auton d'estin noein to kai houneken estin noema*,⁽⁴⁾

which is translated by Diels: *Denken und das Gedankens Ziel ist ein und dasselbe*; by Capelle:

Dasselbe aber ist Denken und des Denkens Gegenstand. If we now compare the first sentence

(fragment 3) with the second sentence (fragment 8), we find that "being" as an object of thinking coincides with thinking about that being. The subjectivist interpretation, approximately as in

Descartes, would seem to be put aside, but surely the meaning is not yet fully clear for that reason.

Diels, however, does have grounds for his analysis, that is to say, for his interpretation in terms of "substance" (*einai* -- *to on*, *das Seiende*), which he supports by the whole text of Parmenides' poem,

by Parmenides' intention to recognize what actually "is," and to assert the impossibility of knowing what "is not." But if we are to decide for a definite interpretation, then we must not only study the

whole of Parmenides' poem, but also examine other texts to which, in this instance, Parmenides might directly or indirectly be tied, that is, look at the part of philosophy which could have been

known to him. Moreover, we have to try to disclose Parmenides' own intuition by considering an analogous situation and, in this way, explain the proper intention of his thought. All of this will be

relevant to the interpretation that we finally give to the words "thought and being are one" or "to think and to be is the same thing." Thus, the unambiguity of the meaning does not depend only on

the syntax and semantics of individual words in the sentence or of the sentence as a whole, but primarily on the situation.

The question now is: what meaning did *einai* and *noein* have for Parmenides in his immediate situation? Furthermore, did he distinguish *einai* and *to on*, *noema* and *noein*, being and existence,

content and object of thought? Let us assume that we know the following about his relation to predecessors or to contemporaries and followers in the Eleatic school: Parmenides responds in his

poem partly to the teaching of Heraclitus on origin, partly to the teaching of Anaximander on apeiron, and simultaneously to the teaching of the Pythagoreans, who were endeavoring to

demarcate, to define, the "boundless" quantitatively. He applied a more profound concept of existence or being not only as physical existence in space, but also as substance, the essence of the

physical, which is not quantitatively definable, like matter, and of which it cannot be said that it appears "more" here and "less" there (since "to be" means either that [something] "is" or "is not").

This substance is definable by thought as its own object and without it nothing exists. Apparently, what is at stake is to overcome, to demonstrate if you like, the impracticality of "negation" for

knowledge and to establish the basic "position" prior to any thought of particularities. Here we have a case of a confrontation with the "boundless," with the identification of existence with the world of

numbers and thus with the views of Anaximander and the Pythagoreans. What is at stake is a higher reality than reality originating empirically (Heraclitus). There are many grounds for this conclusion

in the context of the poem as well as in the historical reality known to us. These problems were taken up by the Eleatic school, which later, during the time of Zeno and Melissus, attempted to

reconcile formally Parmenides' original intuition about thinking that attains being with the problem of the continuum of existence and the discursiveness of concepts, that is, with the logical problems

of mastering the "integrity" of being as the substance of phenomena, the "immutable" being itself which "hard Necessity keeps in the shackles of bounds that hold it fast on every side." The whole

intent of the antinomies and paradoxes of this school is to demonstrate the unreliability of other schools on the questions of becoming and ceasing-to-be, of being and nonbeing, of the changeability

of the position, color, or shape of an object.

It is our intention here only to indicate possibilities for a definite interpretation and not to choose one it is simply a question of showing the need to approach as closely as possible the situation in

which Parmenides wrote his poem, if we are to understand it. It would certainly be a great help if we were able somehow to ascertain different situational possibilities with the assurance that they had a

ground in history, and at the same time to ascertain the forms of thought, or better of expression, which we have at our disposal. In this way the arbitrariness of interpretation could be limited to a

certain extent, and directions could be given for the intuition of an analogous situation. For that

purpose, however, a mere typology of "world views" would not be adequate, but only the elucidation or deciphering of the whole "constitution of philosophy." This is an important goal which today philosophy can no longer neglect; but it goes beyond the framework and possibilities of this article. If we were to succeed in this goal, it would be possible to establish for the first time a true philosophical history of philosophy, that is, an interpretation which would neither fragment this history into independent, isolated accidents nor impose upon it a definitive rational scheme of development in which what follows fulfills what precedes it as if the latter existed only for the sake of the former. Formal developmental connections manifest themselves above all in language, in a syntactic-semantic structure of expressive possibilities that are at the disposal of a unique act of thought, which always wants to master being anew. And precisely that tension, in turn, has an effect on the development of the vehicle of expression, that is to say, on the development of language." (pp. 93-96)

Notes

(3) John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 4th ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1930): " . . . for it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be" (p. 173). H. Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 3rd ed. (Berlin, 1912), vol. 1; W. Capelle, *Die Vorsokratiker* (Leipzig, 1935); M. Dessoir (ed.), *Lehrbuch der Philosophie* (Berlin, 1925).

(4) Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, "The thing that can be thought and that for the sake of which the thought exists is the same." (p. 137)

From: Ladislav Rieger, "The Semantic Analysis of Philosophical Texts", in: Peter Steiner (ed.), *The Prague School. Selected Writings, 1929-1946*, Translated by John Burbank, Olga Hasty, Manfred Jacobson, Bruce Kochis, and Wendry Steiner, Austin: University of Texas Press 1982, pp. 83-102. (Originally published in Czech in 1941).