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## Reflections on Parmenides' Monism

### Abstract

In this article, I attempt at exploring Parmenides' understanding of Being, that is, the notion of *esti*, and the basic function of *esti* in his overall monistic vision. I also discuss, in this context, the identity of *einai* and *noein*, the internal connections between *esti* and *aletheia* as well as what he means by the concept of *logos*. I argue in detail that Parmenides' monism has a very peculiar character in that he does not speak about one big single entity, but about the uniqueness of Being itself as the ground of all things in the cosmos. In that sense, one can qualify it as non-material monism and, at the same time, as non-ontical monism. But it also contains an identity philosophy, that is, the view that Being can only be spoken of in terms of identity statements. I try to develop the thesis that it is possible to interpret Parmenides' reflections on *esti* with respect to the difference between Being itself and a being, (the ontological difference) which, arguably, corresponds to the way Parmenides contrasts *esti* vis-à-vis plurality and change, while identifying the former with pure being (*to eon*) and the latter with non-being (*to me eon*).

### Key Words

*Esti*, *Aletheia*, Monism, Identity, Ontological Difference, Plurality, *Logos*, Non-Being.

## Parmenides'in Monizmi Üzerine Düşünceler

### Özet

Bu makalede, Parmenides'in Varlık anlayışını incelemeye teşebbüs ediyorum, yani *esti* kavramını ve onun tüm bir monistik bakış içerisindeki temel fonksiyonunu. Bu bağlamda, *einai* ve *noein*'in özdeşliğini, *esti* ve *aletheia* arasındaki içsel bağlantıları ve aynı zamanda Parmenides'in *logos* kavramıyla neyi kastettiğini de tartışıyoruz. Ayrıntılı bir şekilde, Parmenides monizminin son derece kendine has bir karaktere sahip olduğunu, çünkü O'nun tek bir devasa varolan şeyden değil de, bizzat Varlığın herşeyin esası ve temeli olarak biricikliğinden bahsettiğini öne sürüyorum. Bu anlamda, o, maddi-olmayan monizm olarak, ve aynı zamanda ontik-olmayan monizm olarak nitelendirilebilir. O, ayrıca, bir özdeşlik felsefesi ihtiva etmektedir, yani Varlık hakkında yalnızca

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özdeşlik cümleleri kurulabileceği görüşü. Parmenides'in *esti* üzerine mülâhazalarını bir varolan ile Varlık arasındaki ontolojik fark açısından yorumlamanın mümkün olduğu tezini geliştirmeye çalışıyorum. İddia edilebilirse, söz konusu ontolojik ayrıma Parmenides'in *esti* ile çokluk ve değişim arasında kurduğu zıtlık karşılık gelmekte, beriki saf varlıkla (*to eon*), öteki ise varolmayanla (*to me eon*) özdeşleştirilmektedir.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

*Esti*, *Aletheia*, Monizm, Özdeşlik, Ontolojik Fark, Çokluk, *Logos*, Varolmayan.

Monism is held to be the doctrine that there is only one entity. The doctrine is one of the most pervasive themes of the whole history of ontology. As a matter of fact, ontology, that is, philosophical reflection on the nature of Being, started out as monism in western Anatolia with such Ionian thinkers as Thales and Anaximander. We might say that philosophy has first shown itself as monism in ancient Greece. Accordingly, it is striking that monism, taken historically, proves to be the very first intuition of philosophical reflection. It is, however, to be noted that early Greek thinkers who began by positing one ultimate reality that is capable of explaining everything and all diversity of observable natural phenomena did this by tacitly presupposing that all is actually one. In other words, emerging almost instinctively a particular monistic insight has determined the inception of philosophy. Only later did philosophers like Empedocles and Democritus, begin to wonder about the possibility of a multiplicity of ultimate entities, about the world as a plurality of some sort. So they came to be aware of this monistic presupposition and confronted it in various ways.

One might argue, along these lines, that it is ultimately with Parmenides that monism becomes a mature self-conscious position, which means, comes to be reflectively convinced of the necessity of unity as such. This unity is the unity of Being<sup>1</sup> that lies far behind and beyond the deceptive plurality of beings. On that basis, one might argue that Parmenides is the first true monist of the history of philosophy, but at

<sup>1</sup> Parmenides' principal notion is "esti" which in Greek is a very rich notion and certainly means more than the "be" of English. It concatenates the senses that English might tend to dissociate, such as "is" (copula) and "exists". It also involves an implicit subject; "it is", "it happens to be", "it exists", "it is the case", "it obtains", "it is true", "it occurs", "it is present", "there is" etc. Thus we should keep in mind that it can only imperfectly be rendered as Being. Parmenides sometimes uses its infinitive form "einaí". Even though we will, in the present article, mostly use Being (with a capital) to render it, sometimes it will seem preferable to employ directly the Greek word "esti", as well. I made use of many translations of Parmenides' poem preferring to exploit in the quotations the ones I deemed most successful, with sometimes slight alterations on the basis of my interpretation. For the most part, however, I took John Palmer's translation as standard and reworked it in accordance with my interpretation. In addition, so as to give the reader freedom for his/her own interpretation in this regard, I provided the original Greek expressions in crucial places.

the same time, he is perhaps the most idiosyncratic monist of all, for reasons which will constitute the focus of the discussion to be carried out in the present article.<sup>2</sup>

First of all, to understand the sort of monism found in Parmenides, the chief point to note is that Parmenides does not posit one ultimate physical entity, i.e., cosmos (material monism), but the non-entitative ground of entities as a whole. This is because, Parmenides thinks, entities (whether physical or not) lead to innumerable puzzles, confusions and contradictions if they are taken as grounds in themselves, as self-sufficient for their ontological explanation. Thus Parmenides would insist on a categorically different level of explanation and would reject not only water, air or Democritian atoms but also any possibility of Platonic forms and Aristotelian substances as fundamental. Thus the ground and explanation is Parmenides' starting-point, which stipulates that there must be *only* one ultimate ground accessible only to thinking, not to senses which by nature involves plurality and change. Crucially, what we call "ground", the Presocratic philosophers called *arkhe* (ἀρχή); for the Presocratics, including Parmenides, the pursuit of wisdom (later called *philosophia*) was, first and foremost, a search for the *arkhe* of all things. *Arkhe* means starting-point, governing and sustaining power, source, origin and principle. *Arkhe* as such was something on the "ground" of which things and the world get their simple and ultimate intelligibility, their explanation and their truth. In virtue of being a ground for all the plurality of sensible beings and thus categorically higher and superior to them, this ground must represent Being in the truest sense of the term, as compared with beings accessible to us through sense perception. Taken in the Greek context, For Parmenides, then, *arkhe* cannot be anything other than Being itself. As will be discussed below, beings become beings and step into the realm of *aisthesis* in and through the light they borrow from their *arkhe*, Being itself. "Be" is manifested in entities, but, strictly speaking, does not belong to them. Thus for Parmenides Being functions as a ground (or *arkhe*) in the sense that it makes entities entities and that entities *are* entities "owing" to Being. There is a sense, however, in Parmenides that because Being is the governing source (ground, *arkhe*) which makes things be, it deserves to be designated by "be" in a more primordial and perfect sense than the entities, which taken independently of, or apart from Being (i.e., taken purely in themselves) are simply not (*me eon*). This might be why he speaks of *esti* as *eon* in the Fragment 8 (more on this below).<sup>3</sup>

So, interestingly enough, Being itself becomes an active force as an absolute, atemporal ground and in this way serves the need for a ground function. This seems to be a crucial point about Parmenides' Being. It cannot involve change, for change, when thought in relation to being itself, would imply nothingness as part of its essence, because change presupposes a movement through different states. In other words, difference in Being presupposes nothingness in Being, and this is an apparent

<sup>2</sup> Similar views seem to have been expressed by the Eleatic predecessors of Parmenides (e.g., Xenophanes), but we do not know much about them. I think, in this context, it is reasonable to assume that Parmenides represents the culmination of the Eleatic school. Yet, it is also important that Parmenides' position represents a contrast against Melissus' material monism.

<sup>3</sup> An interpretation of Parmenides in terms of ontological difference such as the one we will present here is thus possible on that basis.

contradiction in terms, because nothingness cannot “be”. The pure simplicity of Being automatically rules out change and movement, and therefore time; Being, in itself, is pure constancy and timelessness. Being (*esti*), so to speak, shines, in an eternal now, upon beings making them what they are.

As indicated above, Parmenides' word is *esti* (or *einai*) which is usually translated as Being (with the capital “B”). The most basic point to be made about Parmenides' thought relates to a correct understanding of *esti*. As suggested, *esti* is not *a* being, rather it is the very phenomenon of Being itself. That is, *esti* means “is”, understood not simply as a copula, but as a verb, indeed as a reflexive verb: as an activity which happens in such a way that it determines all meaning and truth we attach to things. Heidegger's notion of ontological difference might be of help here, that is, the view that there is a fundamental difference between a being (*Seiende*) and Being as such (*Sein selbst* or *Sein als solches*).<sup>4</sup> Heidegger himself interprets *esti* as *Anwesenheit*, namely Being as presencing, and argues that the experience and understanding of Being as *Anwesenheit* constitutes the Greek beginning which has been lost in the ensuing philosophical tradition. That the difference between a being and Being itself is crucial to the sense of *esti* and that Presocratics keenly understood such difference is most clearly evidenced in the famous assertion of Parmenides' younger contemporary, Protagoras: “Man is the measure of all things, of being (*ton onton*), that it is (*hos estin*), of non-being (*ton de ouk onton*), that it is not (*hos ouk estin*).” When Parmenides says that “thinking (*noein*) and being (*einai*) are one and the same” (Fr. 3), it is evident that *esti* and *einai* are the interchangeable terms for him. Consequently, Parmenides' monism requires that we should modify the standard or conventional description of monism presented in the introduction of this paper, namely the view that only one entity exists. This is not monism in Parmenides' sense, since for him, *esti* is not an entity at all.

What is crucially linked with this is the point that Parmenides' Being involves necessity:

ἡ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὥς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι

The one that is and that it is not possible for it not to be (Fr. 2.3)

πάνπαν πελέναι χρεὼν ἔστιν

Being is necessarily, totally (Fr. 8.11)

Being (*esti*, *einai*, or *pelenai*) alone must be, and cannot fail to be, while it is impossible for nonbeing (*meden*, *me eon*) to be. It follows that necessity (to be) already belongs to the essence of Being as such. To be is already to be necessarily. In this connection, *Ananke* (as well as *Moirai* and *Dyke*) is just another name for the radical necessity which is *esti* itself, for nothing can, by Parmenides' own premises, limit *esti* from outside; *esti* is unlimited and infinite, that is, *apeiron* in the truest sense of the

<sup>4</sup> For ontological difference (*ontologische Differenz*), see *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 17-18, 24, 52, 72, 120, 225, 227 ff., 318 ff. Ontological difference is implicit to the whole account of *Sein und Zeit*, but not examined there in detail. Even though here I read Parmenides mainly on the basis of ontological difference, my treatment of Parmenides, on the whole, differs from Heidegger's, as a careful reader will easily notice.

word. This is largely the same point Avicenna makes with his key phrase “the necessary of Being as such” (*wajib al-wujud bi-dhatihi*), which is “pure being” (*wujud mahz*), “pure thinking” (*aql mahz*) and “pure good” (*hayr mahz*). Avicenna is another thinker who thought of necessity (*wujub*) and Being (*wujud*), and by the same token, contingency (*imkan*) and beings (*mawjudat*), as strictly together.<sup>5</sup> It seems Avicenna is quite explicit in identifying Being itself as something purely divine, however. This is, in fact, not something accidental, rather we see that Avicenna accomplishes a comprehensive dialogue with Greek philosophy. Then plurality, i.e., all entities in the spatio-temporal world, is characterized by possibility, that is, possibility to be or not to be, or say, contingency. Accordingly, *esti*, as distinct from beings, means necessity and is necessarily (i.e., essentially) pure, whole, complete, unchanging, One. Of course, given that for Parmenides *esti* is simple sameness, each of these latter attributes should imply all others and mean the same things.

A curious point here, is that if Being is also activity, more specifically the activity of thinking, this would seem to imply that this unusual sort of activity can never involve any change and movement. That being is also activity unequivocally follows from Parmenides' (afore-mentioned) assertion concerning the identity of *noein* and *einai*:

τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι. / For it is the same to be and to think.

To reflect fully the emphatic tone of the expression, we can also read it as: “For to be and to think are one and the same”, which has the virtue of conveying us the connection between “one” (*hen*) and “the same” (*to auto*). Being is purely One, thus self-same, thus unique. Anything to be said of Being then must fall in this area of identity, be determined by this identity (i.e., identity with Being itself) for the essence of Being cannot admit otherness and difference. For the same reason, it is quite possible to construe Parmenides' thought as an “identity philosophy”, which also might mean that he is the purest monist the history of philosophy has ever witnessed:

Οὐδὲ διαμετόν ἐστιν, ἐπεὶ πᾶν ἐστὶν ὁμοῖον·

Nor does it have parts, for it is totally self-same (Fr. 8. 23).

Ταὐτόν τ' ἐν ταυτῷ τε μένον καθ' ἑαυτὸ τε κεῖται

It lies in itself alone, remaining itself the same in the same (Fr. 8. 29)

ἑωυτῷ πάντοσε τωαὐτόν / every way the same as itself (Fr. 8.57)

*Esti* is pure (unmixed), simple (partless), absolute (unconditioned) and self-same (no otherness attachable to it, thus not liable to predication in the Aristotelian sense).

Consequently, when Parmenides says that Being and thinking are one and the same, this can only be interpreted as meaning that Being is activity and that this activity is thinking. This thinking, in turn, must be identical with truth (*aletheia*), for it cannot subsequently or on occasion set itself into a certain relation or movement towards truth as that which normally and originally stands apart from it, given that such activity cannot accept change and process. Thus thinking oriented to truth as its objective cannot be the case. Rather thinking is always truth itself. Accordingly, the modern distinction

<sup>5</sup> Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, book 1, ch. 6-7, book 8, ch. 4-7.

between truth and reality (Being), too, is alien to Parmenides' conception (as are the distinctions between subject and object, mind and external world), for there cannot be any distinction, from Parmenides' perspective, between truth and thinking, once time and process are ruled out and thinking is raised to the simple and absolute level of Being, to the level of pure identity with Being.

It is clear that Parmenides, unlike those philosophers coming before him, can no longer argue for a single underlying stuff as the source and ground of all things. Rather the true reality cannot belong to this realm of plurality and change, since plurality and change are inextricably linked with non-being (*me eon*) (more on this below). It follows that the realm of plurality and change cannot be real in the true sense of the word. One might well conclude that the true reality (*esti*, i.e., Being in the pure sense) stands on a categorically higher level. This is another way of saying that *esti* is transcendent. That level of entities subject to change, time and movement which we experience through sense perception must be only deceptive with regard to the transcendence of "Being without qualification." However, even if *esti* is transcendent, it must be present in all things insofar as they *are*. This transcendent presence can show itself, can happen in no other way, but only in and through thought. Nonetheless, this self-showing, to be a genuine self-showing, cannot use thinking as an instrument and hide its true character behind it in such a way that thinking becomes merely an epiphenomenon. Instead, it must determine thinking wholly and absolutely, that is, in such a way that it must show itself in its own identity, which is to say, as thinking.

As is well-known, Parmenides puts forward two paths (the first path as truth's own path and the second path as the alienated path, the path of *doxa*, which is followed by most people, "mortals") that describe the way humans do in fact live, that is, are related to truth. He holds that the path to *esti* is radically remote from "the beaten path of humans," against which the Goddess warns denouncing it as a path involving no truth, that is, no real understanding and no real ground for human beings. Truth is simply and necessarily the truth of *esti*, which is categorically closed to those who confine themselves to "the beaten path of humans" (ἀνθρώπων ἐκτὸς πάτου, Fr. 1.27). Here truth as the truth of *esti* cannot just mean truth "about" *esti* as something external to it and somehow related to it as its corresponding description. It essentially means that truth belongs to *esti* and to it alone. In this sense, it can only be understood as issuing from *esti*, as its self-disclosure. In fact, at that level, it also should become clear that we cannot make a distinction between *esti* and self-disclosure, that is, between *esti* and truth: *esti* discloses itself as itself. Hence *esti* and truth (*aletheia*) are the same in the sense that there can be no "otherness" between truth and *esti*. When Parmenides speaks of the "unshaken / untrembling heart of well-persuasive truth" (Ἀληθείης εὐκυκλέος ἀτρεμῆς ἤτορ, Fr. 1.29), he means to indicate its origin ("unshaken heart") in *esti*. In addition, truth in its original essence as the self-disclosure of *esti*, Parmenides argues, makes possible genuine persuasion for human beings.<sup>6</sup> It alone involves true trust. The

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger interprets *aletheia* as unveiledness or unconcealedness (*Unverborgenheit*) and argues that this is the original sense of truth presupposed in all correct propositions. Presocratics experienced truth (i.e., *aletheia*) always in relation to *lethe* (veil, veiledness), that is, as unveiledness. This etymology is something which crucially informed the early Greek

identity of truth (*aletheia*) and Being (*esti*) is the very ground of the identity of thinking (*noein*) and Being (*einai*).

If the above interpretation is justified and thinking is not a “process” oriented to some truth (or truths), but the pure and reflexive activity of Being, then it seems to follow that thus conceived thinking is absolute truth in activity. Thus, in the following words, Parmenides seems to indicate the ultimate identity of *arkhe* and *telos* in the activity of thinking:

Εὐνὸν δὲ μοί ἐστιν, / ὅπποθεν ἄρξωμαι· τόθι γὰρ πάλιν ἵξομαι αὔθις.

For me it is all the same / from where I am to begin; for that is where I shall come back again (Fr. 5).

As suggested, Being is categorically exempt from any ontic characterization. It is not something like water or air; you cannot find it within the realm of plurality. Being is also to be distinguished from “cosmos”:

οὔτε σκιδνόμενον παντὶ πάντως κατὰ κόσμον / οὔτε συνιστάμενον.

Neither being scattered everywhere in every way in a world order (*cosmos*), nor being brought together (Fr. 4).

Yet it is, as pure awareness (*noein*), that makes possible the presence of entities to us even when entities are absent and not concretely present.

Λεῦσσε ὅμως ἀπεόντα νόῳ παρεόντα βεβαίως

Behold things that, while absent, are steadfastly present to thought (νόῳ) (Fr. 4.1)

Therefore “only judge with logos” (κρῖναι δὲ λόγῳ, Fr. 7.5) through which this meaningful presence, this transcendence in beings becomes open to humans, comes to light (the first path of inquiry, the path of *aletheia*). No doubt, *logos* is not only one of the crucial words of Parmenides’ poem, but also of the whole Greek thought from the beginning to the end. In and as *logos*, *esti* gives itself to humans, that is, as the meaning dimension of the whole realm of entities. *Logos* is the saying of *esti* and as such it is what grounds language as the articulation of meaning through words. In this way, words become more than mere sounds, but “saying”. Greeks had several words for “saying” or “speaking”; *legein* (hence *logos*), *eipein* (hence *epos*) and *phasthai* (speak immediately for oneself or another, aorist middle). *Legein* and *phastai* can be found in Parmenides’ poem used more or less in the same sense. *Phastai* is a reflexive word which comes from *phao* (light), and is closely linked with both *phainestai* (showing oneself) and *physis* (nature as shining forth) and *apo-phansis* (showing-forth in speech).<sup>7</sup> In saying

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consciousness of *Aletheia*. After P. Friedlaender’s meticulous philological attack, such an etymology Heidegger proposes for *aletheia* seems now less credible. For Friedlaender, even Homer did not understand *aletheia* as *a-letheia*. (see P. Friedlaender, *Plato I: An Introduction*, trans. H. Meyerhoff, New York: Pantheon, 1958). However, we need not make such an etymological-historiological case, as far as Parmenides is concerned. As N-L. Cordero points out (p. 30, footnote 106), Fr. 1 (9-18) where we have such metaphors as going “from night into light”, “pushing veils from heads”, “opening of gates”, already suggests such an unveiling as essential to *aletheia*, perhaps not etymologically, but philosophically.

<sup>7</sup> Here and elsewhere in this article I owe a lot to an interesting study by Raymond A. Prier on this issue. See *Thauma Idesthai: Sight and Appearance in Archaic Greek* (Florida: University Presses of Florida, 1989).



Being (the first path of inquiry), Being (*esti*) lights itself up, whereas people in ordinary ways of saying (the path of *doxa*) are typically heedless of this self-disclosure which gives and grounds the *cosmos*. Parmenides' text intimates that reaching the level of such saying and the adequacy it requires is a real challenge for human beings. Not habit, not commonsense, not sensible things, not the world of plurality which we tend to take as first and foremost, but rather *logos* is essential here; hence our need in inquiry to follow the only path leading to *esti* and away from the habitual level of plurality and the senses. For *logos* is not a human power, but something with which we humans as humans are in touch.<sup>8</sup> And it would not be wrong to contend that this being in touch with *logos* is what gives us our humanity, is what distinguishes us. (In fact, this view seems to be the characteristic of, almost, the whole Greek tradition from Heraclitus to Stoicism). Thus *logos* should be the same as *noein*, or *nous*, pure awareness exclusively through which distinction and primacy of *esti* can first be discovered and experienced. In fact, what Parmenides means by "habit" (ἔθος, which is linked with "ἐκτὸς") is just "the beaten path of humans", that is, "common sense" in the sense of commonly accepted and prevailing opinions (*doxai*) of people. Habit is also crucially connected with sense experience. On the one hand, habit arises from an accumulation of blind experiences; on the other hand it is structured and guided by, and is thus a function of, common sense. Therefore, common sense here means the supremacy of usualness and commonality. Hence when Parmenides rejects sense perception as blocking authentic experience of truth/Being, he does not understand it in the modern epistemological sense as neutral and objective act directed towards pure or brute facts: He would argue that there is no such a thing at all. Rather he conceives of it in relation to a "path" (ὁδὸς), i.e., a whole way of being we are ordinarily in. As far as our primordial access to truth is concerned, he puts into question the primacy of thus-conceived senses in favor of the primacy of *logos*. If *logos* is thinking as saying and expressing Being, then, we might suggest, *logos* is Being that animates and determines language and makes humans meaning-related beings.

Thinking and that because of which there is thinking are the same, since without *esti*,

thanks to which it is expressed, you will not find thinking, for there is not and there will

not be anything else apart from that which is being." (Fr. 8. 34-43)

Anthony Kenny provides an interesting translation of the same lines:

to think a thing's to think it is, no less.

Apart from Being, what'er we may express

thought does not reach.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, all thinking is, at bottom, thinking of Being; thinking is just the expression of Being and therefore belongs to Being. Thinking cannot contain anything

<sup>8</sup> As Heraclitus puts it: "τοῦ λόγου δ' ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ζώουσιν οἱ πολλοὶ ὡς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρόνησιν" ("even though *logos* is common to all, people live as if they had a private understanding of their own.")

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Kenny, *Ancient Philosophy*, p. 204.

apart from Being, for anything apart from Being is not, and what is not can neither be said nor be thought of. Thinking expresses beings only insofar as they *are*. Precisely, it is only *esti* that can be “truly” said and thought. Error issues, in the path of *doxa*, from the fact that the latter is a path of people who are “confused” and “wandering”, “deaf and blind”, “undiscriminating hordes” etc., that is, lost in the plurality of visible and changeable things, in the world of taken for granted *endoxai*: the path of *doxa* is a path of thoughtlessness. Thinking of Being is self-disclosure. It follows that the first path of inquiry is the path of this self-disclosure. Parmenides’ expression (in Fr. 8.50) is interesting: “for here I stop my trustworthy account and thought (Ἐν τῷ σοι παύω πιστὸν λόγον ἡδὲ νόημα) of true reality (ἀληθείης).” From this sentence (the use of ἡδὲ) it is easy to surmise that *logon* and *noema* are identical. As just indicated, *logos* and thinking are the same. Again Parmenides places an emphasis on its trustworthiness, or let us say, on the point that only inquiry into *aletheia*, into being itself, i.e., the first path of inquiry, possesses real trustworthiness. No other path is reliable. Parmenides claims that it must be infallible for it comes directly from Being itself and because thinking and Being in their pure senses are one and the same things. *Esti* is *aletheia*, true reality (or, what is the same, Truth itself). Consequently, we can say that *esti*, *logos*, *noein*, *aletheia* and *hen*<sup>10</sup>, among others, present themselves and become understandable only in terms of their radical identity.

As mentioned above, *esti* is not an entity; for although a particular entity may be absent, *esti* is never-ending or never-failing presence, the eternal now. This presence is essentially presence, that is, something open or given, to thought:

But behold things that while absent steadfastly present to thought  
for you will not cut off *esti* from holding fast to *esti* (Fr. 4).

Correspondingly, this presence as given to thought constitutes the essence of thought in such a way that without it thought would not be at all. Again we see that it is not possible for Parmenides to separate thought and *esti* into two different levels such that thought might be set over against *esti*. Rather, they are not (or, “not conceivable”) apart from one another; the pure act of Being is thinking. This is the basic sense of the identity Parmenides puts forward between *esti* and thinking.

When speaking of *esti* in the poem, Parmenides often appeals to (carefully chosen) metaphors: as a sphere (Fr. 8.43); as an “ethereal flame of fire” (Fr. 8.56); as light; and as sun (Fr. 9.15). Presumably, these are meant as lively metaphors. A metaphor (carry-beyond) in this context is a poetic expression that carries understanding beyond entities to Being itself. Hence Parmenides’ way of expression, like much of Greek thought, is unequivocally poetic. Otherwise, if *esti* were, for instance, something really spherical, it would then be something spatial and, like everything spatial, would be limited, a result which seems unacceptable in the face of his most basic claims, for the limit, as Aristotle concludes, “would function as a limit against the void” (*On Generation and Corruption* 325a17). A charitable reading would take the metaphor of

<sup>10</sup> In the fragmentary poem, *Peri Physis*, Parmenides speaks of *hen* (One) only in the adjectival form. However, *hen* in the noun form appears in Zeno’s fragments and in Plato’s *Parmenides*.

sphere as alluding to the perfection and self-sufficiency of *esti*.<sup>11</sup> As Parmenides urges “ἔστι γὰρ οὐκ ἐπιδενέξ / for it [esti] lacks nothing at all” (Fr. 8.33).

Parmenides does not present us with a sort of physics, but rather a meta-physics as an identity philosophy. Actually, physics (cosmology) corresponds to the second path (*doxa*) which he excludes from the proper path of truth. People are typically found absorbed in the readily available, in plurality, in what is present and in the opinions and customs that embody this blindness and contribute to its predominance in their lives. The first path therefore requires a categorical move in which sight turns towards, is oriented “into light” (εἰς φῶς);<sup>12</sup> this path as the path of truth is “always oriented towards the rays of sun” (Fr. 15). Sight becomes lighted and with this light it turns into thinking. This light then is nothing other than *esti* (Being) itself which gives thinking its own essence, for without the insight of Being, thinking *is not* at all. This insight into Being is however nothing but the self-revelation of Being itself: thinking says (*fasthai*) Being and only Being. Keeping in mind the fact that “*fasthai*” stems from *fao* (light), we can say that thinking is self-revelation of Being whereby Being happens *as* Being, i.e., as meaningful, transcendent presence that lights up the non-being, the cosmic realm of entities. It is in this lighting up that meaning and Being overlap. Heraclitus’ assertion would befit Parmenides very well: “lightning rules in everything” (τὰ δὲ πάντα οἰακίζει κεραυνός). Accordingly, for Parmenides every meaning shines forth in the eternal now that underlies all presence and breaks forth into cosmos as light into darkness.

Consequently, *cosmos*, on this account, appears to be an intermingling and interplay of being (light) and non-being (night).

Since all things have been named light and night

and things in virtue of their powers have been given as names to these and to those,

all is full of light and dark night together,

of both alike, since nothing is with neither. (Fr. 9)

... ethereal flame of fire,

being gentle, most light, every way the same as itself

the opposite [is] dark night, dense in form and heavy (Fr. 8)

You will know the aether’s nature, and in the aether all the

signs, and unseen works of the pure torch

of the brilliant sun, and from whence they came to be (Fr. 10)

... along this path [the path of *esti*, the first path of inquiry]

signs are there, very many (Fr. 8:2-3)

Now in this context we can perhaps find an answer to the very question: how can Parmenides set out to provide a cosmology once he denies change, motion and plurality? Why does he include the way of *doxa* at length in the poem if he repudiates it? Is this merely the Goddess’ inoculation? A possible answer is that he does not deny

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle notes in *Metaphysics A* (1016b16-17): “This is why the circle is, of all lines, most truly one, because it is whole and complete (*hole kai teleios*).”

<sup>12</sup> Notice parallels with Plato and, most specifically, with “the cave allegory” presented in the *Republic*, VII.

change, motion and plurality at all. He denies it for the essential ground and *arkhe* (*esti*) of entities, not for entities themselves which seem to involve for their coming about a curious interaction of Being and non-being. This calls to mind certain Platonic dialogues (*Republic*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist* and *Timaeus*) where becoming, as opposed to being, somehow involves the entanglement of not-being (though it is not possible to discuss Plato's huge indebtedness to Parmenides here<sup>13</sup>). The interplay between Being and nothingness that characterize the realm of entities (*cosmos*) is necessary for the emergence and revelation (*aletheia*) of Being as Being, that is, it is necessary if we are to understand Being at all, if we are to engage with meaning. Our key assumption here is that for Parmenides entities do not possess Being at all: “Νυκτιφαῆς ... ἀλλότριον φῶς” / “shining at night with a foreign / borrowed light” (Fr. 14). Rather Being shows itself in entities and on this “ground” we can say that they *are*. To say an entity *is*, for Parmenides, is to say this: an entity exhibits Being, or equally, Being shows itself in an entity, just as some darkness is needed in order that light may manifest itself. So I would agree with Luchte: “The question is not that of Being – but of an account of change that allows us to disclose Being, or, at least, that aspect that *shows* itself.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, when Parmenides says that “all is full of light and dark night together/or both alike, since nothing is with neither”, he refers to the ontological structure of entities which make up of cosmos. This ontological structure is based on intelligibility and self-disclosure (*noein* and *phaos*) which implies that entities are not entirely intelligible while Being is. When we understand entities we do this on the basis of σήματα (*semata*, as signposts of Being): that is, what is understood is actually nothing but Being itself. “ταύτη δ' ἐπὶ σήματ' ἔασι πολλὰ μάλ' / There are very many signs along this path” (Fr. 8.2-3) and “τῷ πάντ' ὄνομασται / To it all things have been given as names” (Fr. 8.39). Only Being is intrinsically understandable (Fr. 8.34-38). As suggested earlier, *esti* is transcendent meaningful presence in the entities.

So far we have interpreted Parmenides on the basis of ontological difference and have considered *esti* as the phenomenon of Being itself. However, one may well object that Parmenides sometimes uses the word *eon* (notably in Fr. 8) which signifies that which is, an entity. The question here arises: does Parmenides make Being (*esti*) into an object? Kahn finds this move in Parmenides' argument “illicit.”<sup>15</sup> Here I would argue that the crucial distinction Parmenides draws between non-being (*to me eon*) and being (*to eon*) can be construed as corresponding to the ontological difference between a being and Being itself. This reading may call attention to the obvious point that Parmenides places an exclusive emphasis on *esti* and *einai*. In Fragment 8, where he brings *to eon* to the fore, he also notes quite emphatically that “the decision about these matters hinges upon this; it is or not (*estin he ouk estin*).” In 6.1-2, he declares “for Being *is*, but nonbeing it is not” (ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι, μηδὲν δ' οὐκ ἔστιν). And we should not

<sup>13</sup> It is almost evident that the very logic of being a “form” is taken from Parmenides' *tautologia* of Being. In this sense, as Palmer argues, Parmenides' influence on Plato goes even far deeper than that of Socrates. See John Palmer, *Plato's Reception of Parmenides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). However, Plato's discussion of Parmenides for which the *Sophist* is presumably the supreme case reflects basically Plato's own *problematique*, not Parmenides'.

<sup>14</sup> James Luchte, *Early Greek Thought: Before the Dawn* (New York: Continuum, 2011), p.151.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Kahn, “The Thesis of Parmenides”, pp. 719-20.

forget that Parmenides presents a cosmology while at the same time expelling plurality and change from the level of *esti* / *einai*. According to this reading, *eon* does not refer to a being in the usual sense. Taken in the absolute, Being reclaims all the senses of “be” (which we might tend to attach to beings) so radically that while entities, in themselves, turn out to be devoid of Being in a world of plurality and change, Being (*esti*) itself needs to be understood as the pure source, the absolute concentration (πάμπαν πελέναι χρεών ἐστίν Fr. 8.11; Τῷ ξυνεχὲς πᾶν ἐστίν Fr. 8.25), and therefore also more worthy to be called that which is, *eon*. We might say that now at that pure level of Being, it no longer makes sense to speak of a distinction between Being and that which is. Hence we already encounter the expression in Fr. 6.1; “ἐὼν ἔμμεναι”, namely “that which is being, exists” or in Cordero’s translation, “by Being, it is.”<sup>16</sup> However, Being is Being as revealing itself (*aletheia*) and this happens in the otherwise non-existent world of multiplicity and change; Being is that which animates a realm of nothingness (*cosmos*), but remaining nonetheless categorically irreducible to it. If Being is self-revelation, then thinking is another name for this self-revelation, which only happens in human beings who are essentially in touch with *logos*. What is immediate to man is not sense-perception of entities, but *logos* (self-revelation of Being). Being is truly itself only in those human beings who can experience / say (πυθέσθαι / φάσθαι) Being as such, who think Being (the path of *aletheia*), thus letting self-revelation of Being in themselves, whereby Being lights up and humans become en-lightened. As Parmenides envisions it, this seems to be the ultimate mission of the path of *aletheia*.

Furthermore, in this context, even to use the expression “Being is predicated of X” is, strictly speaking, wrong because it implies that something different attaches to *esti*. Nothing can qualify or modify Being for nothing can be thought to be additional or in difference to its own essence which is thus an utter simplicity admitting no differentiation within itself. Then it is Being itself, simple, utter and pure, that is, “without qualification” (*haplos*). Neither is essential predication applicable to Being, for Being cannot be subsumed under a genus. (Moreover it is not a genus at all.) In short, *esti* can only be spoken of in terms of identity statements. Therefore, from a Parmenidean point of view, the Aristotelian *ousia* which is qualified by various properties, that is, a “subject of predication” (as this is developed in the *Categories*), can never serve such a ground function which is necessary for the explanation of beings as a whole, i.e., of plurality.

Nevertheless, it is worthwhile pondering some essential parallels between Parmenides’ *esti* and Aristotle’s *theos*. Seemingly, both ground the intelligibility of the universe; both represent absolute Being; both are timeless, and absolutely self-sufficient; both, pure activity of thinking; finally, both are essentially detached from the spatio-temporal realm.<sup>17</sup> However, we face a curious problem here. Parmenides’ Being (*esti*, *einai*) is not a subject of predication and not an entity, that is, it is not an *ousia* from which *kategoriai* can be discerned through a relationship of ontological

<sup>16</sup> Nestor-Luis Cordero, *By Being It Is: The Thesis of Parmenides*, p.63.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle rightly transfers Parmenides’ notion of Being to the level of his “first philosophy”, and resists attempts to discuss it as a physical theory. See *De Caelo*, 298b14-24, *Metaphysics*, 986b14-18, *Physics* 184b24-185a12.

dependence. Although *esti*, like *theos*, is totally independent (*choriston*), as Parmenides conceives of it, from all beings, but it is not a “some this” (*tode ti*). Aristotle’s *theos* is an *ousia* (i.e., that which is in the fundamental sense) from which, as it were, any talk of being proceeds at bottom as an abstraction. Even though Aristotle sees a distinction between *ti esti* and *ei esti* (e.g., the *Posterior Analytics* 92b), and between *einai ti* and *einai haplos* (e.g., *Metaphysics* Z, 1030a), for him to be is, in the privileged sense, to be a substance (*ousia*), i.e., being both some this and independent, which, in turn, requires that *ousia* be qualified by certain (essential and accidental) properties. Indeed, everywhere Aristotle emphasizes the distinction between substance and its attributes (categories), the latter is dependent on, yet distinct from, the former, as a distinction which is logically and ontologically indispensable.

As indicated above, because of the necessity that Being is utterly simple and pure, Parmenides cannot introduce any distinction between being (*ousia*, substance) as the independent bearer of properties and properties inhering in that substance as parasitical or dependent entities. Symbiosis between the two (because substance without properties is also unthinkable) would again lead to a supposition of an otherness inhering or found somehow in Being, which would result in a confusion of nothingness with Being. Indeed the concept of substance is not possible without this symbiosis, which Parmenides would not apply to Being in the pure sense (*esti*). In other words, logically constitutive to the concept of *ousia* (beingness) is the concept of “property” (categories as well as essential properties which relate the substance to species and genus). If an Aristotelian categorial scheme is ruled out, the concept of Being as subject of predication is also ruled out. But in passing we should concede that concerning Being Aristotle already writes that it is not a genus.<sup>18</sup> Hence speaking of Being becomes a *tautologia*, as Heidegger notes in relation to Parmenides,<sup>19</sup> that is, “saying the same”, for Being is utter (i.e., “unqualified”) sameness. On the other hand, that which involves total sameness must be perfectly unique. Therefore, in the Parmenidean ontology there cannot be a place for substances as self-sufficient and independent entities which serve as the ultimate subjects of predication. This is not only because *esti* is not a substance at all, that is, not a subject of predication; it is also because self-sufficiency and independence follow from *esti* (as Being without qualification) and are not to be found at the level of entities.

Some parallels between Aristotle and Parmenides, albeit not perfect, can be drawn which may be helpful for an understanding of Parmenides’ monism. Additionally, this parallelism is easily understandable once it is granted that Aristotle’s thought (together with Plato’s) already contains a crucial Parmenidean element. We may only touch on the fact that in Aristotle’s case, unity is understood as the pervasive identity of intelligibility (*ousia* as form) and ontological ground (*ousia* as pure activity, *energeia*), a position which has its roots in Parmenides, namely in the identity of *noein* and *einai*. Aristotle’s *theos* is pure activity of thinking and as such pure activity of Being. Despite this crucial common ground, Parmenides, as already suggested, would

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 92b13.

<sup>19</sup> “Heidegger’s Last Seminar”(1973), trans. I. Thompson, available at [www.unm.edu/~ithompson/heid\\_trans01.html](http://www.unm.edu/~ithompson/heid_trans01.html).

not argue that *esti* is an *ousia*. *A fortiori*, he could not be saying that there is one supreme and primary entity prior to all else. He rather says that Being in its pure, absolute, non-temporal, unchanging, in short definitive, sense is self-identical, One, unique and simple. Its unity is also the unity of pure activity of thinking.

This also invites a brief comparison with Spinoza who argues that only one entity exists and this entity is to be interpreted as a substance. A substance is that which exists by itself and is conceivable only through itself. There can be but only one substance. It is as such the principle ("ground") of Spinoza's mechanistic universe. Spinoza's substance, as contrasted with Parmenides' *esti*, has two features; (1) it is a mechanistic principle behind all natural facts, that is, the mechanistic intelligibility of things and (2) it is the ultimate subject of all predication. Considered from a Parmenidean point of view, Spinoza presents us with merely a physics and deals with the phenomenon of Being in this framework, which in turn means that Spinoza is working essentially within the sphere of *doxa* and can never rise up to the true level of Being. What Spinoza does is just round up and pack the plurality of entities into a big single entity called nature (or thought, or God) and say that there is only one whole nature, one whole mechanism such that every other thing is in some way or another is an aspect of this big machine. Hence Parmenides' monism, unlike Spinoza's, cannot be understood as the view that only one entity (or substance) exists. Neither would he say that the sum of all things with a necessary rational order makes up *esti* (Being). If Spinoza argued against Parmenides that something is intelligible only in terms of its properties, he would perhaps counter that there is an inherent difficulty in understanding the assertion that something is intelligible in terms of something else.

It is true to say that Parmenides' account involves the idea that to do justice to the phenomenon of Being itself we need to resort to "the simplest sufficient ontology", to use Jonathan Schaffer's phrase. Observing that commonsense is divided between the methodological demand for "the simplest sufficient ontology" and the pluralism of sense-perception ("folk mereology"), Schaffer (who is some sort of modern-day Spinozist) maintains that we should opt for the former and "paraphrase away" the latter: "for what could be simpler, or more elegant, than a one-object ontology?"<sup>20</sup> This one-object is the whole concrete world (or "one vast world-atom"). But it should be apparent from the foregoing discussion that Parmenides does not feel himself bound by such an either/or. If we can understand "commonsense" here, as Schaffer appears to, in the sense of the most basic assumptions that seem to be operative in all thinking, then we can say that commonsense is not divided for Parmenides, because he does not speak about entities, but rather about the phenomenon of Being itself; utterly simple and pure Being (the path of truth, of *aletheia*) is not incompatible with an acceptance of the plurality of entities, change and motion (the path of *doxa*) provided that the former is appreciated as the essential ground lying beyond, animating and enabling the latter. *Esti*, thus, as the identity of meaning/thinking (*noein*) and Being (*esti*, *einai*) is the precondition of there being any entity whatsoever. All entities, so to speak, shine in the light of this pure act of Being (i.e., in *esti* as the identity of Being and thinking), and thus "are". All entities are ("found") in Being, have their Being, that is, "are" or "exist".

<sup>20</sup> J. Schaffer, "From Nihilism to Monism", pp. 187-188.

The most serious problem (thus construed) Parmenides might face here is that it is not at all obvious how Being in Parmenides' sense can function as a causal power. If one interprets Being as *arkhe* and as ground for all cosmos and beings, is it required that this grounding function must also involve a causal power and efficacy? Then, is not Parmenides' Being something too abstract for such a task? Presumably, we cannot give any satisfactory answer to this question given the material limitations of Parmenides' text. One thing, however, we might note, in this connection, is that it is very much the same problem which Plato faces in asserting forms as causal powers over sensible things, the problem which spurred Aristotle's criticism that found profound expression in the whole natural philosophy of the latter.<sup>21</sup>

I would conclude by touching upon one additional problem, which I find in Charles Kahn's interpretation of Parmenides and which, as I see it, reflects a typically modern misconception about Parmenides' thought. Kahn interprets Parmenides' poem in terms of a methodological priority of knowledge over ontology and cosmology, which he thinks is really essential for Parmenides: "... with his characteristic sense of logical order, he puts the question of knowledge first, as methodically prior, as the architectonic question which assigns to other questions their proper place."<sup>22</sup> He concludes that Parmenides fundamentally means *esti* in a veridical sense, that is, Parmenides makes an epistemological point about human beings' relation to the things: "something is" means "something is true". There cannot be such thing as knowing non-being. However, contrary to Kahn's claims, this reduces what Parmenides has to say to mere triviality (which is belied, among others, by the fact that Parmenides' legacy in Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, and thereby in the whole western tradition, has proved to be enormously significant). This is because Kahn, despite all the remarkable ingenuity of his treatment of Parmenides, takes for granted the modern platitude that when we speak about Being, we just speak about aspects of objects, that Being is something exhausted by entities. In fact, for Parmenides, as discussed above in detail, exactly the reverse is the case; by Being, beings are, not vice versa. *Esti* is the ground in which beings come to "be" beings. "Something is" means Being (*esti*) shows itself up (*aletheia*) in and through that thing, a happening (*physis*) that is not reducible to that thing brought to light: "something is" means "something is brought to light", "something shines". Stated otherwise, the phenomenon of Being (*esti*) presupposes the phenomenon of meaning (*aletheia*).

On the other hand, nowhere in the *Peri Physis* we can find any indication or support for the epistemological priority Kahn speaks of. This way of reading seems unwittingly to impose our (taken for granted) modern sense of philosophy on Parmenides; an anachronism is the case here. This seems to be alien to Parmenides for whom *esti* reveals itself as truth (*aletheia*). No methodical strategy can really help here; all we can do is "orient ourselves attentively towards the sun" (Fr. 15), i.e., towards *esti* for its self-disclosure and keep our focus from being distracted by the world of *doxa*. Here we should not conflate method with path; while the former signifies a defined structure of research into entities, the latter brings out a whole way of life in which one

<sup>21</sup> See Plato's *Parmenides*, (133a-134e) where it is called "the greatest difficulty".

<sup>22</sup> C. Kahn, "The Thesis of Parmenides", p. 706.



stands in the world. A genuine path is oriented towards some overarching goal, and thus involves an acute self-awareness constituted by this goal. Hence Parmenides argues that the second path, namely the path of *doxa*, as different from the first path of inquiry devoted to *esti*, completely lacks this awareness. Any method, on Parmenides' account, falls outside the first path, in so far as it is by nature focused on plurality, diversity and change, that is, on non-being. The first path, accordingly, is not a path of systematic research, not driven by constructing an architectonic of knowledge at all. It is a simple path of thinking that experiences in itself the identity of Being with thinking. Such a path turns its vision into the simple and expresses it in pure simplicity as proper to itself.

Consequently, as I discussed above, Parmenides' monism is a non-material monism: it is not a one-sensible-thing (say, "cosmos") ontology. He also does not understand monism in an ontical way, does not say that there is just one entity or one kind of entity. Rather Parmenides' thought arises from an experience of the uniqueness and identity of Being itself as the transcendent ground of the possibility and intelligibility of all beings. It is the necessarily unchanging ground which can alone explain a world of changing entities which we deal with through sense-perception. This transcendent intelligibility, in turn, corresponds to the transcendence of pure thinking. *Esti* then is the true level of reality hidden in a special way from the ordinary way of looking which is captivated by plurality and change. As indicated, at that level, any talk of *esti* is conceivable solely as *tautologia* (ταυτολογία), i.e., "saying the same", which is most proper to its utterly simple and unique essence: this pure monism is, therefore, necessarily an identity philosophy. The proem also strongly suggests that the experience Parmenides conveys seems to have a strange revelatory dimension to it. Parmenides in the proem tells us that this radical insight into Being is given to him directly by a Goddess. One can quite easily observe that her presence bears a stamp on the text to such a remarkable degree that we cannot presumably set aside this Goddess connection as mere myth. As Kahn points out "Parmenides simply lets the divinity speak for herself."<sup>23</sup> In a special sense, *esti* seems to function as "divine, being in the center, governing all things, everywhere grounding / ruling over intermingling and birth" (ἐν δὲ μέσῳ τούτων δαίμων ἢ πάντα κυβερνᾷ· πάντα ... ἢ ... τόκου καὶ μίξιός ᾗρχει) Fr. 12.3-4. Perhaps Goddess whispered to Parmenides nothing other than her own truth (*aletheia*). In this case, it would not be entirely mistaken to assume that we witness, in this philosophical poem, Parmenides' highly unusual attempt to speak of the essence of the divine as Being itself.

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<sup>23</sup> C. Kahn, *The Thesis of Parmenides*, p.706.

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