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Parmenidean Monism and The Routes of Being

Abstract

It is well known that Parmenides presents his concept of being in an unified way, and if he distinguished different senses of being he never did that explicitly. However, the tradition of commentaries of his poem attempts to distinguish the many senses of being there involved. One very famous interpretation initiated by Russell and supported by many scholars throughout the Twentieth Century claims that the paradoxical result of Parmenides's monism is a consequence of his incapacity to discern the three basic senses of the verb to be: identity, predication and existence.

Patricia Curd (1998) proposed a revolutionary interpretation of the poem. According to Curd, Parmenides does not propound the thesis of numerical monism (the claim that there exist only one thing) despite the many centuries of commentaries that read the poem as a proposition of this thesis. Instead of that, she suggests that Parmenides held the thesis of "predicational monism", according to which "each thing that is can be only one thing; it can hold only the one predicate which indicates what it is". Building upon previous results given by Alexander Mourelatos, Curd argues that the verb to be in Parmenides's poem is primarily predicative and that, according to the Parmenidean thesis, the only acceptable way to use "is" is in a predication of essence. The interpretation proposed by Curd and Mourelatos has been regarded as satisfactory by many scholars on the basis that they incorporate the results of new investigations on the sense of the verb to be, such as Kahn's publications against the existential reading of this verb in Ancient Greek texts.

As an indirect counterargument to Curd's interpretation, I will present a reading of Parmenides's thesis on being that incorporates the recent results of Kahn's investigation while still deriving the traditional result of numerical monism. I take the veridical sense of the verb to be as basic in order to interpret Parmenides's statements on the "two routes of investigation": the way of being and the way of

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non-being. According to my view, the two routes represent an attempt of definition of the concepts of Truth and Falsehood. I understand Parmenides's contradictory formulation of the way of non-being (that it is not and by necessity is not-being) as a recognition of the apparent contradiction involved in the attempt to define what is false by means of a true sentence. For if there is a sentence that correctly describes the non-being, it is a true sentence and therefore belongs to the other route, the route of being, the route of truth. I will show how numerical monism can be easily reached from the acceptance of this starting point.

Keywords: Parmenides . Ontology . Monism . Being . Reference

Resumo

É amplamente reconhecido que Parmênides apresenta seu conceito de Ser de uma maneira unificada, sem nunca distinguir explicitamente os diferentes sentidos deste verbo. Apesar disso, a tradição de comentários vem há muito tentanto distinguir os diferentes sentidos de "ser" envolvidos em sua argumentação. Um interpretação, proposta inicialmente por Russell e que se tornou muito influente durante o século XX, afima que o resultado paradoxal do monismo parmenídico é uma consequência direta da sua incapacidade de distinguir os três sentidos básicos do verbo ser: identidade, predicação e existência.

Patricia Curd (1998) propõe uma interpretação revolucionária do poema. De acordo com Curd, Parmênides não adota a tese do monismo numérico (a afirmação de que só existe uma única coisa), a despeito do fato de que, há muito séculos, a tradição de comentário identifica o poema como a proposição desta tese. Em lugar do monismo numérico, Curd afirma que Parmênides adotava o "monismo predicativo", de acordo com o qual "cada coisa que é pode ser apenas uma coisa, podendo possuir apenas o predicado que indica o que esta coisa é." Amparada em resultados previamente alcançados por Alexandre Mourelatos, Curd argumenta que o verbo "ser" no poema de Parmênides possui um valor primariamente predicativo e que, de acordo com tese de Parmênides, a única maneira legítima de usar este verbo é em uma predicação de essência. A interpretação proposta por Curd e Mourelatos foi considerada satisfatória por muitos especialistas, sob o argumento de que tal interpretação incorpora os resultados das investigações mais recentes acerca dos sentidos do verbo "ser", como os estudos de Kahn contra a possibilidade de uma leitura existencial para este verbo em textos gregos antigos.

Como contra-argumentação indireta à interpretação de Curd, apresentarei uma leitura do poema de Parmênides que incorpora os resultados dos estudos de Kahn, ao mesmo tempo que ainda é capaz de derivar o resultado mais tradicional do monismo numérico. Considero o sentido veritativo do verbo "ser" como o sentido fundamental para compreensão das afirmações de Parmênides sobre os dois "caminhos de investigação": o caminho do ser e o caminho do não-ser. De acordo com minha interpretação, os dois caminhos representam uma tentativa de definição dos conceitos de Verdade e Falsidade. Eu compreendo a formulação contraditória de Parmênides para o caminho do não-ser (que é e que necessariamente é não-ser) como o reconhecimento da aparente contradição envolvida em se tentar definir o que é falso por meio de uma sentença verdadeira. Pois, se há um sentença que corretamente defina o que não é, então esta sentença é verdadeira e, portanto, pertence ao outro caminho, o caminho do ser, o caminho da verdade. Pretendo demonstrar como o monismo numérico pode ser facilmente alcançado a partir desta interpretação.

Palavras-chave: Parmênides . Ontologia . Monismo . Ser . Referência

It is well known that Parmenides presents his concept of being in a unified way, and if he distinguished different senses of being he never did that explicitly. However, the tradition of commentaries of his poem attempts to distinguish the many senses of being there involved. One very famous interpretation initiated by Russell and supported by many scholars throughout the Twentieth Century claims that the paradoxical result of Parmenides's monism is a consequence of his incapacity to discern the three basic senses of the verb to be: identity, predication and existence.

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Parmenidean thesis, the only acceptable way to use "is" is in a predication of essence. The interpretation proposed by Curd and Mourelatos has been regarded as satisfactory by many scholars on the basis that they incorporate the results of new investigations on the sense of the verb to be, such as Kahn's publications against the existential reading of this verb in Ancient Greek texts.

As an indirect counterargument to Curd's interpretation, I will present a reading of Parmenides's thesis on being that incorporates the recent results of Kahn's investigation while still deriving the traditional result of numerical monism. I take the veridical sense of the verb to be as basic in order to interpret Parmenides's statements on the "two routes of investigation": the way of being and the way of non-being. According to my view, the two routes represent an attempt of definition of the concepts of Truth and Falsehood. I understand Parmenides's contradictory formulation of the way of non-being (that it is not and by necessity is not-being) as a recognition of the apparent contradiction involved in the attempt to define what is false by means of a true sentence. For if there is a sentence that correctly describes the non-being, it is a true sentence and therefore belongs to the other route, the route of being, the route of truth. I will show how numerical monism can be easily reached from the acceptance of this starting point.

Introduction

It is really an understatement to say that Parmenides's arguments influenced those who came after him. In fact, it can be sustained that the concept of being and the guidelines for philosophical investigation outlined in his poem shaped all the philosophical systems of antiquity. The power of Parmenides's argumentation comes from the fact that he adopts very strong, undeniable premises and reach surprisingly paradoxical results. As a consequence, all the late presocratic philosophers, as well as Plato and Aristotle, took the challenge of preserving the basic intuition behind Parmenides's concept of being without compromising themselves with his controversial conclusions.

Recently, one of the most prominent paradoxical results of Parmenides's Poem had its legitimacy contested. Modern interpreters maintain that Parmenides was not a monist, or at least not the kind of monist that the tradition usually considers him to be. Patricia Curd, a supporter of this claim, distinguishes three kinds of monism: material, numerical, and what may be called predicational monism. Material monism claims that there is just one

underlying matter out of which the whole universe is made. One famous example of material monist is Thales of Miletus for whom everything is made of water. Numerical monism, in its turn, asserts that there is just one item in the universe. According to a numerical monist there exists just a single entity and nothing else. And finally predicational monism is the claim that "each thing that is can be only one thing; it can hold only one predicate, and must hold it in a particularly strong way". If it is, say F, it must be all, only, and completely F.

Of course, these three sorts of monism are mutually independent; material monism, for example, is consistent with the existence of many numerically distinct things, provided each one is made out of or is a modification of a single fundamental stuff. Predicational monism is consistent with an ontology composed by a plurality of numerically and materially distinct things, on condition that each one can hold only the one predicate that indicates what it is. And numerical monism is compatible with the idea that the single entity that exists is subject to a plurality of predicates and is composed by a variety of different materials. It is also clear that more than one of these three kinds of monism can be maintained at the same time; a theory might adopt both material and numerical monism, for instance, and a numerical monist might also hold predicational monism by claiming that the only existent thing can hold just one predicate. However, according to Curd and the proponents of the new interpretation Parmenides was exclusively a predicational monist, and did not actually care about how many items can be found in the universe nor about what stuff they are made.

By claiming that Parmenides was a predicational monist rather than a numerical monist, Curd and part of the modern scholarship confront a tradition of interpretation that goes back at least to Plato, who described Parmenides's thesis as the claim that "the all is one" (*Parm.128b1*). And in order to support such a controversial claim, these authors put forward an equally innovative analysis of Parmenides's Poem. This analysis is based on a new reading of fragment B2, the fragment in which the goddess states the content of the only two possible routes of investigation: the way of being and the way of not-being. In the next section, I will analyze this innovative reading of fragment B2, and consider its pros and cons. After that, I will present my own reading of B2 which preserves some of the positive aspects of the new interpretation while avoiding its negative consequences.

The New Reading of Fragment B2

In a very crude translation, fragment B2 of Parmenides's Poem would run like this:

> Come, I shall tell you, and you who listen, receive my word,
> What are the only routes of investigation there are to think:
> The one, that "is" and that is not for not being,
> Is the path of Persuasion (for it attends upon truth);
> The other, that "is not" and that necessarily is for not being,
> That, I point to you to be a path from which no tidings ever come,
> For you could not know what is not (as it is not possible),
> Nor could you point it out [...]

The conceptual core of Parmenides's philosophy can be found in the sentences that describe the only two possible routes of inquiry: The one, that says: "is" and that is not for not being, and the other, that says: "is not" and that necessarily is for not being. These sentences formulate Parmenides's basic premises, and it is widely accepted that the understanding of the whole argument behind his poem lies in the correct interpretation of these lines. In order to decode these enigmatic sentences, scholarship has focused primarily on two questions. 1) What subject is to be supplied for the bare "is" and "is not" that figure in the sentences? 2) What is the sense of the verb "to be" at work in Parmenides's assertions about being?

During the last century, a wide range of answers have been offered to these questions. With regard to the first, for example, a group of interpreters believe the sentences actually had an expressed subject in the original text, but it was lost in the manuscript tradition and, therefore, this lost subject needs to be recovered through the clues provided by the surviving text. Among this group there are those who claim that the lost subject of both sentences is the nominal use of the Greek verb "to be"; those who claim that the two sentences must have had different subjects, and propose "being" as the subject of the first sentence, and "not-being" as the subject of the second; and those who claim that the lost word is an indefinite pronoun rather than another occurrence of the verb "to be". A different line of interpretation maintains that the sentences never had a grammatical subject, but a conceptual one which must be supplied by the reader. Conjectures about what would be this conceptual subject range from the tautological "the absolute being" (Mansfeld, 1985:

45) or "the existent" to complex concepts such as "all that is collectively real" (Robinson, 1979: 56) or "all that can be known" (Kahn, 1967: 708-710).

The second question, about the sense of the verb "to be", equally received a great variety of answers. In the secondary literature, we can find advocates not only of each one of the three basic senses of the verb (predication, identity, and existence) but also interpreters that see the parmenidean concept of "being" as the result of a confusion or a composition of these different meanings. But more surprising than the vast number of different interpretations advanced by specialists is the fact that the supporters of all these different readings usually point out to the very same passages of the poem as evidence for their claims. Thus, the problem in answering these two questions is that the key passages of the text seem to count as evidence for all available conjectures, as consequence these competing interpretations co-existed for a long time with little ground been gained or conceded on any side.

An alternative to this deadlock situation was offered by Mourelatos who proposed that the occurrences of "to be" in fragment B2 should not be understood as fragments of propositions, but as references, from the stand point of a metalanguage, to certain modes of discourse. According to Mourelatos no textual or conceptual subject needs to be provided for the sentences, and although the expressions "is" and "is not" stand for positive and negative predication respectively, they are not instances of a predicative use of "to be", but only representations of the two basic "types of proposition" or "forms of judgment". So on this new view the verbs of the two routes are unresolved copulas with subject and predicate unspecified. The first route representing the "sentence frame" of positive predication and the second route the "sentence frame" of negative predication, what is indicated in modern notation by the symbols *Fx* and *~Fx* respectively.

I consider the idea of treating the bare "is" and "is not" of fragment B2 as propositional functions rather than incomplete propositions to be the most important insight of Mourelatos's interpretation. The strength of this idea comes from the fact that someone who comes across a bare "is" in the beginning of a sentence should not be expected to be able to fill this verb with conceptually complex subjects or predicates, since that would demand a great deal of prior understanding on the part of that reader at such an early stage of the argument. Therefore, in Mourelatos's translation, the occurrences of the verb "to be" in B2 are represented with blanks on both the subject place and the predicate place in order to indicate that these open spaces represent variables which are not meant to be replaced.

Unfortunately, Mourelatos does not explore further the consequences of this first insight, and as soon as he begins his analysis of Parmenides's arguments it becomes clear that he believes that Parmenides is using a very specific kind of predication. This special sense of the verb "to be", dubbed by Mourelatos "the 'is' of speculative predication," is supposed to feature in statements where the predicate "belongs essentially to, or is a necessary condition for, the subject" and thus gives the subject's reality, essence, nature, or true constitution (Mourelatos, 1970: 56–60). Well, it is clear that such kind of predication requires rather severe restrictions on the range of possible subject and predicate terms. Therefore, accepting it as the correct interpretation for Parmenides's use of "to be" would move us back to a situation in which we have to assume prior understanding on the part of the reader in order to supply the correct subject an predicate and make sense of the arguments. Another important drawback of this interpretation is that it prompts a good argument for predicational monism, but no argument whatsoever for numerical monism. Accordingly, those lines in Parmenides's poem that have widely been thought to state numerical monism (B8.5-6, 8.22-5, 8.36-8; cf. B4) are read as referring specifically to the only kind of predication legitimated by Parmenides, that is, the one concerned to the genuine nature or essence of things. As explained by Curd, for Parmenides "to be is to be the genuine nature of a thing, to be just what a thing is; to be such a nature, something must be what it is unchangingly, completely, and as a unity." (Curd, 1998:20)

A Veridical Reading of B2

Instead of interpreting Parmenides's uses of "is" and "is not" in the rather specific sense of a "speculative predication" or a predication of essence, I want to propose a veridical interpretation for the most fundamental occurrences of the verb "to be" in fragment B2. According to this reading the Greek verb "to be" has the sense "to be true", "to be so", or "to be the case". The importance of this veridical use is called to our attention by Aristotle, who describes it as one of the four philosophically relevant senses of the verb "to be" in his theoretical lexicon in Metaphysics's Book V. He says, "And also *being* and *is* signify that (something) is true, and *not being* signify that it is not true but false" (Met. V 7, 1017a 31). So, rather than attributing a syntactical role to the bare is and is not that open the two important sentences,

I assign a veridical semantic function to them. As consequence, the two routes represent not only the sentential frames of positive and negative predication, but also designate the only two possible truth values; that is, the True (or what is the case), and the False (or what is not the case).

Before presenting my reading of B2, I would like to emphasize some of the formal (syntactical) characteristics of the veridical use of "to be". To begin with, the veridical construction of the verb is absolute; that is, it does not carry any predicate or predicative complement attached to it. While, in the predicative use, we say that "x is F", in the veridical construction, we say that "x is the case" without any term occupying the predicate place after the verb. On the other hand, while the predicative construction takes an object or an individual as subject; the subject of a veridical construction is propositional, since truth and falsehood are attributes of sentences, propositions or judgments, but not of things, individuals or concepts. The third characteristic of a veridical use is that it is normally correlated with a clause containing a verb of saying or thinking. That clause provides the propositional content that occupies the subject place of the veridical constitution, and that is affirmed to be true or false by the verb "to be".

In Parmenides's fragment B2, that previous clause is provided by the infinitive verb *noesai* "to think" that figures in the sentence immediately before the enunciation of the two routes. This verb is usually translated in the passive voice, and the sentence rendered "the only two ways of investigation that are possible to think (or that can be conceived)". However, it is also perfectly right to translate the infinitive *noesai* in the active voice, and render the sentence as "the only two way of investigation there are to think". This second translation seems better, since there are only two single ways to think about any intentional content, and each corresponds to the only two truth-values that can be attributed to it. The routes correspond to the activity of thinking proposed by each way: on one hand, there is the possibility to think that a given proposition is the case; and, on the other hand, there is another possibility to think that it (this same proposition) is not the case. It should be noticed, however, that the propositional content said to be true or false by the routes is not given to us. Therefore, it must be represented by a variable, following Mourelatos insight of treating the occurrences of the verb "to be" as propositional functions rather than fragments of propositions. Thus understood, the key lines of B2 would run like this:

> Come, I shall tell you, and you who listen, receive my word,
> What are the only routes of investigation there are to think:
> The one, [to think] that P is the case and that not-P is not the case,
> Is the path of Persuasion (for it attends upon truth);
> The other, [to think] that P is not the case and that necessarily not-P is the case,
> That, I point to you to be a path from which no tidings ever come,
> For you could not know what is not (as it is not possible),
> Nor could you point it out […]

The first positive consequence of this new reading is that according to it the contents of the two routes are self-evident truths. The first route states that if any given positive proposition (P) is true, then by logical necessity its negation (not-P) will be false. And the second route states that if any given positive proposition (P) is false them its negation (not-P) will be necessarily true. What makes Parmenides's use of these logical equivalences unique is the fact that while he commend the first route as a path of persuasion, for it follows the truth, he rejects the second route as an impossible path. Parmenides give us ground for his rejection of the second route by saying that it is not possible to know what is not the case nor point it out. But what is it that true negative propositions and false propositions have in common, that can be explained as the incapacity to indicate or point out (*phrásais*) what is not?

I take Parmenides's rejection of the route of not-being as a consequence of his affiliation to a particular version of the correspondence theory of truth. Such theory presupposes an ontology of facts (which may, or may not, live along with an ontology of objects) and deflects the problem of the truth of propositions to a *prima facie* problem of reference. Broadly speaking, the correspondence theory of truth claims that a proposition is true if and only if the states of affairs that it describes obtains, *ie*. corresponds to some fact in the real world. So the proposition that "the snow is white" represents the state of affairs that the snow is white and is true only if this state of affairs obtains. On the other hand, according to this same theory, a proposition is false if the state of affairs that it describes does not correspond to any fact.

What is particular to Parmenides is that he adopts the correspondence theory of truth together with a strong realist ontology which prevents the existence of such a thing as a negative fact. Since the correspondence theory of truth states that a proposition is true only if there is a fact in the world in virtue of which it is true and there is no such thing as a negative fact, negative proposition cannot be rendered true due to its lack of correspondence,

and must, therefore, be paired with false propositions. On the account given above, 'not-*P*' is true only if 'P' is false, but '*P*' is false only if it does not correspond to any fact; hence, 'not-*P*' is not made true by any fact: it does not seem to have a truthmaker. As every truth must correspond to something in the world that makes it true, negative propositions are either false or nonsense.

An example can be used to clarify what I consider to be Parmenides's basic intuition. Suppose we have an ontology composed only by these two facts:

In a world like this, the positive propositions "Figure A is white" and "Figure B is black" are both true, since they correspond to the above facts (from left to right respectively). On the other hand, the positive propositions "Figure A is black" and "Figure B is white" are both false, since the states of affairs they describe do not obtain, *ie*. do not correspond to any fact in the ontology. Now, what fact in the ontology would make the negative propositions "Figure A is not black" and "Figure B is not white" true? *Prima facie*, these propositions do not correspond to any fact at all, just like false propositions. A possibility would be to say that these propositions correspond to the very same facts as do the propositions "Figure A is white" and "Figure B is black" respectively. The general form of this solution is the claim that for every negative truth "not-P" there exists a positive fact Q that is incompatible with "P". So the fact that figure A is white plus the fact that being white is incompatible with being black account for the truth of the proposition "A is not Black". But, in that case, what fact would account for the truth of propositions like "Figure A has no smell"? There seems to be no positive fact about A that is incompatible with the property of having smell to serve as the truthmaker of the proposition "Figure A has no smell". Another possibility would be to say that, in this case, the truthmaker is the conjunction of all facts about figure A. Since that conjunction does not contain the fact that Figure A has smell, it constitutes the correct ontological account for the truth that Figure A has no smell. But then, the problem is that this big conjunction of facts, as we may call it, when taken by itself fails to necessitate the negative true "Figure A has no smell". The big conjunction could exist and yet Figure A be smelling.

In any case, both tentative solutions do not contradict Parmenides's premises, but rather presuppose Parmenides's basic intuition that the universe, the world which knowledge is aiming at knowing, so to speak, is the totality of facts, and these facts can only be completely described by true positive propositions. Negative propositions, on the other hand, just like false propositions describe states of affairs that are not *prima facie* part of this totality of facts. In Parmenides's words, false and true negative propositions represent an attempt to point out what is not the case. However, instead of developing complicate theories about what positive fact would play the role of truth-maker for negative propositions, Parmenides's radical solution is to dismiss all negative predication as false.

Two further positive consequences of this reconstruction of Parmenide's argument is that it does not assume any prior understanding on the part of the reader nor presuppose any specific kind of predication, such as the rather specialized sense of "speculative predication" on which Mourelatos and Curd's interpretation rely, in order to make sense. Finally, this interpretation has the benefit of generating the kind of radical monism traditionally attributed to Parmenides, according to which there is just one homogenous thing to which all true propositions refer, and in which all differences are obliterated.

In order to generate this paradoxical conclusion Parmenides needs to assume the already explained premises that: a) Every meaningful proposition describes a state of affairs; b) A proposition is true if and only if the state of affairs it describes corresponds to a fact; and c) There are no "negative facts", plus the optimist assumption that d) Every fact can be correctly described by a meaningful true proposition. From these four reasonable premises Parmenides is able to reach the incredible conclusion that all true propositions describe the same fact. I will present what could have been Parmenides line of argumentation by means of a *reduction*, although there are more dialectical ways of presenting the same argument (cf. Pelletier, 1990).

If there is more than one fact, then at least two distinct true propositions correspond to different facts, say proposition P1 and P2.

P1 and P2 correspond to different facts if and only if there is a true proposition P3 which states that P1 and P2 correspond to different facts. (by the optimist assumption d)

P3 is true if and only if "P1 does not corresponds to the same fact that P2 corresponds" is true.

P3, being a negative proposition, is either false or meaningless. (by a, b, c,)

P3 is not true. (by 3 and 4)

P1 and P2 do not correspond to different facts. (by 1 and 5)

There is just one fact to which all true propositions correspond.

As a final remark, I would like to point out that this same pattern of argument can be used to generate all further Parmenidean conclusions involving change, motion, coming-to-be, destruction, and so forth. For if such an event were to take place then some negative proposition would have to be true.

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