

# Parmenides's *Logos* of Being

[*Metaphor is*] the moment of the detour in which the truth might still be lost.

—JACQUES DERRIDA

## METAPHOR AND METAPHYSICS

Ontology is a paradoxical enterprise. The attempt to give an account (*logos*) of beings (*ta onta*) or of being (*to on*) immediately raises questions about the relation between the word's two components. What is the ontological status of *logos* in an ontological account? On the one hand, *logos* (speech, account, or argument) would seem to stand within the ambit of "the things that are" and thus to be included in the set of its own objects: in accounting for *ta onta*, *logos* must also give an account of itself. On the other hand, *logos* must go beyond *ta onta* and encompass them in order to constitute them as an object of study, in the process subtracting itself from both being and the philosophical account of it. Ontology is thus structured by a fundamental tension between *logos* and *to on*: what bonds connect them and which bounds the other?

These questions go back to the first ontologist, Parmenides, who lived in Elea, a Greek colony in Italy, at the very start of the fifth century BCE. Earlier thinkers, including not only the Ionian natural philosophers but also poets like Hesiod, had meditated on the nature of beings, but Parmenides was the first to explicitly take on being itself. His poem *Peri Phuseōs* (*On Nature*) journeys beyond the limits of the physical world to metaphysics, the study of fundamental reality. That reality—which Parmenides, with stunning simplicity, calls "Being" (*to eon*) or "Is" (*esti*)—lies beyond the myriad ephemeral phenomena of our everyday world. In contrast to them it is ungenerated, indestructible, unchanging, homogeneous, and whole.<sup>1</sup>

Epigraph: From *Margins of Philosophy* by Jacques Derrida, translated by Alan Bass, 241. Copyright © 1982. Reprinted by permission of The University of Chicago Press.

1. *To eon* is the epic form of *to on*. I capitalize Being, Is, and Is Not when translating Parmenides's *to eon*, *esti*, and *ouk esti* in order to mark them as terms of art and to indicate their metaphysical status. As we shall see, the choice of majuscule or minuscule is a question of some philosophical import in

It is also singular: Is is all that truly is, and everything else is merely the false object of human opinions (*doxa*).<sup>2</sup>

How does one write a *logos* of such a Being? To express it in language would seem to entail subjecting it to a logic not only alien but in fact antithetical to its nature. Being is monadic, but language creates meaning through difference: "bound" is not "bond"; "sphere" is neither "here" nor "square." The sense of a word in any given context is determined by the exclusion of other possible senses, a present absence strictly forbidden within Parmenides's ontology, where Is Not is declared impossible, unthinkable, and unspeakable. Its inseparability of presence and absence, sameness and difference, makes language inherently ambiguous, again in contrast to the solipsism of Is, which is completely and only what it is, a pure and perfect orb of presence.

*Logos* and *To Eon* would appear to have different and incompatible natures. Parmenides explores this paradox with marked self-consciousness; indeed, his every poetic choice seems designed to intensify it. His poem is divided into two sharply delineated sections or, in his dominant metaphor, "routes": the route of Truth that leads to Is and the route of Opinion, which confuses Is and Is Not. The 161 surviving lines of Parmenides's work preserve the bulk of the former (commonly referred to as the Aletheia) but only a small fraction of the latter (the so-called Doxa). These diverging roads are approached via a lengthy proem that describes the journey of the philosophical initiate (an anonymous "I" addressed as *kouros*, young man) to the palace of the unnamed goddess who will be his guide along the way. This opening "road of much speech" (*hodos poluphēmos*, B1.2/D4.2), with its mythical frame and ostentatiously allusive and ambiguous poetic language, anticipates the Doxa, which the goddess introduces as "the deceptive order of my words" (*kosmon emōn epeōn apatēlon*, B8.52/D8.57) and which is the realm of polyvalent speech par excellence. Drawing on a poetic tradition that opposes seductive persuasion to truth, Parmenides goes out of his way to highlight the potential schism between language and reality, *logos* and *to on*.

He widens that schism through his pointed use of metaphor.<sup>3</sup> Describing a thing by means of something it is not, metaphor intensifies the qualities of lan-

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Parmenides. I prefer the translation "Being" for Parmenides's *esti* and *to eon* to "What Is," which over-stresses the nominal at the expense of the verbal. The best translation, "Is," is grammatically unwieldy.

2. Parmenides's monism was already a source of perplexity and object of critique in antiquity. Aristotle took it to be an extreme "entity" and "essence" monism (see Clarke 2019) and characterized it as akin to madness (*mania*, *Gen. corr.* 1.8 325a2–23). The debate over its nature continues. Palmer's "generous monism" is appealing (2009, 38–50, 181–84); cf. Finkelberg 1999. Tor (2023b) cites other "permissive ontological models" and supports the position. See further Curd 1998, 64–97, and the interesting approach of Robbiano (2006, 129–33; 2016), stressing the unity of Being with knowing and the knower. I assume that Parmenides propounds the singularity of Being (see esp. B8.5–6/D8.10–11) but am not committed to a more precise account of the form that singularity takes.

3. The best discussion of Parmenides's use of metaphor (as of many of his literary techniques) is by Mourelatos (2008c, 37–41, 134–35). He emphasizes its "speculative" nature, whereby existing words

guage in general, calling attention to its predication of meaning on difference, doubleness, and negation. In "White Mythology," Jacques Derrida argues that metaphysics is sustained by metaphor, even as it claims to reach beyond mere rhetoric to reality itself.<sup>4</sup> The ascent from the physical to the metaphysical is attended by a whitewashing of language, as philosophy attempts to efface the rhetorical process by which it produces itself. But this effaced rhetoric persists within the text of philosophy. Even the most blandly abstract philosophical language carries a metaphorical charge: "concept," "theory," "foundation," "idea" are all themselves metaphors. These words bear within them an entire history of philosophy, but one that philosophy itself cannot fully examine, since its instrument of analysis is inseparable from its object. Philosophy may seek to deny this double bind by denigrating metaphor as an extraneous supplement to the thing it describes, a mere "detour" on the path to truth. But in doing so it "would have to posit that the sense aimed at through these figures is an essence rigorously independent of that which transports it, which is an already philosophical *thesis*, one might even say philosophy's *unique thesis*"—the very thesis that metaphor instantiates, that is, the opposition between the idea and its expression, reality and semblances, being and language. Conveying and reproducing this thesis, metaphor is itself, as Derrida says, "a classical philosopheme, a metaphysical concept."<sup>5</sup>

Derrida observes that philosophy is unable to examine its own grounding metaphors because it has no meta-metaphorical metalanguage in which to speak of them.<sup>6</sup> Parmenides labors to invent such a metalanguage. His *Esti* and *To Eon* appear to escape figurative expression and attain to a clarified, objective, almost mathematical denotation of reality.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Parmenides also uses metaphor to examine the intimate entanglement of language and being. These two modes of discourse proceed in tandem in his poem and neither can be discounted. Parmenides is often depicted as a sublime logician who resorts to metaphor as a communicative necessity: *faute de mieux*, since he must speak in human language to his human audience, he makes use of metaphor to convey more clearly or engagingly the abstract truth of Being.<sup>8</sup> But Parmenides's use of metaphor, while

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and images are appropriated to create novel concepts. The distinction between metaphorical and literal was first explicitly theorized by Aristotle (see Lloyd 1995, 172–214; and Gemelli Marciano 2008). But of course Parmenides could have had a practical (and even theoretical) sense of the trope without being able to name it as such. For a sensitive study of metaphor in Greek poetry and criticism and the spatial metaphors through which it was articulated (including that of the road), see Worman 2015.

4. Derrida 1982b. The essay was first published in *Poétique* 5 (1971): 1–52.

5. Derrida 1982b, 229 (original emphasis), 219.

6. Derrida 1982b, 219–20. Thus there would always be one metaphor in excess of the analysis and "the field is never saturated" (220).

7. See Badiou 2014, 18–21, 159–61, 229–59. Badiou (cf. 2007), Lacan (esp. 1998), and Meillassoux (2009) all argue for mathematics as the proper language of ontology.

8. Procl. *In Parm.* p. 665.12–21 (A18/R4): Parmenides was obliged by his poetic form to make use of metaphorical terms and figures. Bryan (2020) offers an astute critique of this assumption of the

extravagant, is never merely ornamental or cosmetic. His metaphors are neither a mere vehicle to the truth, to be abandoned when enlightenment is finally reached, nor just a mode of conveying that exotic truth to the folks back home. Instead, they are themselves ways of thinking about Being and its many perplexities. Heightening the tension between *onta* and *logos*, metaphors both enact the paradoxes of ontology and theorize (though necessarily without resolving) them.

Parmenides thus approaches these questions along two parallel tracks. The first (which is the focus of the next section) is his pathbreaking attempt to journey beyond the bounds of metaphorical language to forge a true language of Being. This novel language would reduce "ontology" to a pleonasm or even a tautology, as *logos* is drawn fully within the charmed circle of *to on*. But this tautology immediately introduces a new conundrum, because Parmenides's singular *To Eon* cannot be the same (*t'auta*) as *logos* or anything but itself. The doubleness of language infiltrates the terrain of *Aletheia* and divides its object, the unique and indivisible Is (*Esti*). The second track is an attempt to safeguard Is through a series of striking metaphors of Necessity's (or Fate's or Justice's) "bounds of bonds" or "bonds of bounds." These vivid images of containment hold Being together (whole, coherent, and indivisible), hold it apart (in its difference from Nonbeing), and hold it in place (unmoving and unchanging), fixing it in its spherical perfection. They promise simultaneously to secure Being and to secure language for Being. And yet, as we shall see in the third section of the chapter, this strategy is no less contradictory than the first: Necessity's bonds exert a force that destabilizes the very reality they are meant to safeguard, leaving it divided and lacking. Not only does metaphor stand within metaphysics, as Derrida posits; at its limit, the metaphysical itself becomes a kind of metaphor in the simile of the sphere that expresses Being's perfection, but only by comparing it to what it is not, a predicate that has already been precluded as impossible and unthinkable.

Along both of these tracks, Parmenides exposes the aporias of ontology, but he does so necessarily from within them, replicating them even as he subjects them to scrutiny. This recursivity—the fact, as Derrida insists, that there is no meta-metaphoric position from which to analyze metaphor—renders futile the ongoing debate over whether Parmenides was simply unaware of the paradoxes of his metaphysical theory or whether identifying those paradoxes was in fact his point.<sup>9</sup>

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separability of poetic form and philosophical content; see also Osborne 1998; Patzer 2006, 83–85; and Granger 2008.

9. For a trenchant articulation of the debate (and argument for the latter position) see Mackenzie 1982. This debate has often centered around the question of why Parmenides includes the *Doxa* if he considers it untrue, a question to which we will turn at the end of the chapter. In an excellent recent article on the tension between language and doctrine in Parmenides, Tor (2023b) discusses many of the same features of the poem as I do, arguing for Parmenides's "reflective preoccupation with, and a consistent and self-aware attitude towards, the scope, orientation and limitations of human language" (268) for describing What Is. Similar arguments are made by Morgan 2000, 67–88; Barrett 2004; Gemelli

With his *To Eon*, did Parmenides attempt to escape *logos* and fail, or did he set out to demonstrate the impossibility of a reality that escapes *logos*? The question is, I think, unanswerable, and the two positions are not mutually exclusive: Parmenides would be caught in the paradoxes of language whether he was conscious of them or not. This means, furthermore, that wherever one comes down on the question of his intent, the incoherences we identify in Parmenides's text should be considered not as a failure of his philosophical theory (as if he really could escape language if he tried hard enough) but rather as one of its generative sources, as he attempts to square the circle of contradictions that inhere within ontology as a philosophical project.

These contradictions are ineradicable because they arise from ontology's irrec-  
oncilable desires: the desire to subordinate *logos* to *to on* by producing a transpar-  
ent language of being, and the desire to subordinate *to on* to *logos*, to fix being  
as an object of discourse and in this way to consecrate what Parmenides calls a  
"trustworthy *logos* and thought about truth" (B8.50–51/D8.55–56).<sup>10</sup> These com-  
peting desires converge in Parmenides in the sphere, which is both the figure of  
a nonfigurable Being and the structure of Parmenides's poem. The sphere instan-  
tiates Parmenides's desire for an autonomous metaphysical reality, a reality that  
can be truly expressed in *logos* but that exists before and beyond any similes by  
which we might describe it. At the same time, as the structure of his poem, the  
sphere represents the dream of a *logos* that encircles that reality in its entirety: both  
Aletheia and Doxa, Is and Is Not. In the sphere, then, *logos* and *onta* encircle one  
another in an ontological Möbius strip, each simultaneously the other's outside and  
inside, neither separable nor synthesizable into a single, homogeneous ontological  
whole. This chapter will trace the contours of this aporia, marking in Parmenides's  
metaphors both the path and the impasses of his revolutionary metaphysics.

### THE HODOS POLUPHĒMOS

Parmenides's poem begins on the road.

ἵπποι ταί με φέρουσιν, ὅσον τ' ἐπὶ θυμὸς ἰκάνοι,  
πέμπον, ἐπεὶ μ' ἐξ ὁδὸν βῆσαν πολύφημον ἄγουσαι  
δαίμονος, ἣ κατὰ πάντ' ἄστη φέρει εἰδότα φῶτα. (B1.1–3/D4.1–3)<sup>11</sup>

Marciano 2008, 37–41; and Cherubin 2017, 2018. I am in sympathy with this approach, but I remain agnostic on the question of intent. See the discussion of the author function in the Conclusion, below.

10. These competing desires have shaped the entire history of Western philosophy and are manifest in the discipline's current bifurcation between analytic (with its faith in mathematics and formal logic) and continental (Nietzsche and his heirs, including Derrida).

11. Sext. Emp. *Math.* 7.111 tells us this fragment was the opening of the *Peri Phuseōs* (though it is unlikely that these were the first lines: Sider forthcoming, ad loc.). I accept his reading of *daimonos* (referring to the goddess); Diels-Kranz print Stein's emendation *daimones*, referring to the Heliades.