# IX

# Parmenides and the Objects of Inquiry

## (a) *Parmenides' journey*

Parmenides of Elea marks a turning-point in the history of philosophy: his investigations, supported and supplemented by those of his two followers, seemed to reveal deep logical flaws in the very foundations of earlier thought. Science, it appeared, was marred by subtle but profound contradictions; and the great enterprise undertaken by the Milesians, by Xenophanes and by Heraclitus, lacked all pith and moment. The age of innocence was ended, and when science was taken up again by the fifth-century philosophers, their first and most arduous task was to defend their discipline against the arguments of Elea. If their defence was often frail and unconvincing, and if it was Plato who first fully appreciated the strength and complexity of Parmenides' position, it remains true that Parmenides' influence on later Presocratic thought was all-pervasive. Historically, Parmenides is a giant figure; what is more, he introduced into Presocratic thought a number of issues belonging to the very heart of philosophy.

Parmenides' thoughts were divulged in a single hexameter poem (Diogenes Laertius, I.16 = **28 A 13**) which survived intact to the time of Simplicius (**A 21**). Observing that copies of the poem were scarce, Simplicius transcribed extensive extracts; and thanks to his efforts we possess some 150 lines of the work, including two substantial passages. It is hard to excuse Parmenides' choice of verse as a medium for his philosophy. The exigencies of metre and poetical style regularly produce an almost impenetrable obscurity; and the difficulty of understanding his thought is not lightened by any literary joy: the case presents no adjunct to the Muse's diadem.[1]

The poem began with a long allegorical prologue, the interpretation of which is for the most part of little philosophical importance. Its last four lines, however, call for comment; for they present one of the strangest features of Parmenides' work. The prologue is a speech to the poet from the goddess who leads him on his intellectual journey and describes his philosophy to him and to us. At the end of her speech she promises thus:

> And you must ascertain everything—
> both the unmoving heart of well-rounded truth,
> and the opinions of mortals in which there is no true trust (*pistis*).
> But nevertheless you will learn these too (145: B 1.28–31).[2]

The words are echoed near the end of the long central fragment:

> Here I stop the trustworthy (*pistos*) account and the thought
> about truth; henceforth learn mortal opinions,
> listening to the deceitful arrangement of my words (146: B 8.50–2).

The goddess has two stories to tell: the truth, and mortal opinions. And Parmenides' poem, after its exordium, falls into two corresponding parts, the first recounting the Way of Truth, and the second the Way of Opinion.

The Way of Opinion is paved with falsity: 'there is no true trust' along it, and its description is 'deceitful'. It could hardly be stated more plainly that the Way of Opinion is a Way of Falsity. Many scholars have found themselves incapable of believing that one half of Parmenides' work should have been devoted to the propagation of untruths; and they have accordingly advanced the palliative thesis that the Way of Opinion is a way of plausibility or verisimilitude or probability, and not exactly a way of falsehood. That conciliatory effort has origins in antiquity; and the dispute between its proponents and those sterner scholars who see no Truth in Opinion, is ancient (Plutarch, **A 34**; cf. Simplicius, **A 34**; *in Phys* 38.24–8). Yet Parmenides' own words decide the contest: he says unequivocally that the Way of Opinion is a path of falsehood and deceit; he says nothing of any probabilities lying on the road; and we are bound to take him at his word. Nor, after all, is it unusual for a philosopher to describe, at length, views with which he vehemently disagrees.

Moreover, the goddess tells us why she troubles to chart the Way of Opinion:

> I tell you all this appropriate arrangement
> in order that no thought of mortals may ever drive past you
> (147: B 8.60–1).

The metaphor of 'driving past *(parelaunein)*' is not transparent. Some gloss it by 'outstrip', or the like, and explain that knowledge of the Way of Opinion will enable Parmenides to hold his own in argument with any old-fashioned cosmologists he may meet. A better gloss, perhaps, is 'get the better of' or 'convince': the goddess, by describing the Way of Opinion and thereby indicating its flaws, will ensure that Parmenides does not succumb to its meretricious temptations. However that may be, the Way of Opinion does not express Parmenides' own convictions. Only a few fragments of that Way survive: it seems to have paraded a full scale account of natural philosophy in the Ionian tradition; but the details are controversial and for the most part unexciting.[3] In a later chapter I shall discuss one fragment from the Way of Opinion (below, p. 486); here I ignore that primrose path and struggle instead up the steep and rugged road of well-rounded Truth.

## (b) *At the crossroads*

Before leading him up the Way of Truth, the goddess instructs Parmenides about the nature of the different ways that face the neophyte philosopher; and she provides him with a proof that the Way of Truth is alone passable. He not only should follow that Way—he must follow it; for no other way leads anywhere. The goddess's exposition and argument are difficult. I shall begin by setting out the relevant texts: if my English translation is in places barely intelligible, that is partly because Parmenides' Greek is desperately hard to understand.

> Come then, I will tell you (and you must spread the story when
> you have heard it)
> what are the only roads of inquiry for thinking of:
> one, both that it is and that it is not for not being,
> is the path of Persuasion (for Truth accompanies it);
> the other, both that it is not and that it is necessary for it
> not to be    5
> —*that*, I tell you, is a track beyond all tidings.
> For neither would you recognize that which is not (for it is not
> accomplishable),
> nor mention it. (148: B 2).

The same thing is both for thinking of and for being (149: B 3).[4]

What is for saying and for thinking of must be;[5] for it is for being,
but nothing is not: those things I bid you hold in mind;
for from this first road of inquiry I restrain you.
And then from that one, along which mortals, knowing nothing,
wander, two-headed; for helplessness in their                                    5
breasts directs a wandering mind; and they are carried about
deaf alike and blind, gawping, creatures of no judgment,
by whom both to be and not be are thought the same
and not the same; and the path of all is backward turning (150: B
6).

For never will this be proved, that things that are not are.
But do you restrain your thought from this road of inquiry (151: B
7. 1–2).

(Note that my translations of 149 and 150.1 are not universally
accepted. 150. 8–9 is also controversial: see below, p. 168.)

Let us begin with 148: what are 'the only roads of inquiry'? and
what does the goddess mean when she says that they 'are for thinking
of'?

The phrase 'are . . . for thinking of' (line 2) renders 'esti noêsai'.
The verb 'noein', of which 'noêsai' is the aorist infinitive, plays a
central role in Parmenides' subsequent argument, where it is
standardly translated as 'think of' or 'conceive'. Some scholars,
however, prefer the very different translation 'know', and thereby
change the whole character of Parmenidean thought.[6] I think that the
standard translation makes better sense of Parmenides' argument;
and I doubt if the heterodox translation is linguistically correct. It is
true that in certain celebrated Platonic and Aristotelian passages, the
noun 'nous' is used to denote the highest of cognitive faculties; and
there are passages in those philosophers, and in earlier writers, where
'intuit', 'grasp', or even 'know' is a plausible translation of 'noein'.
But against those occurrences (which are fairly uncommon and
usually highflown) we can set a host of passages where 'noein' simply
means 'think (of)': 'noein' is the ordinary Greek verb for 'think (of)',
and 'think (of)' is usually its proper English equivalent. Moreover,
the linguistic context in which the verb occurs in Parmenides favours
(indeed, to my mind requires) the translation 'think (of)'. For
'noein' is thrice conjoined with a verb of saying: with 'legein' at
150.1; and with 'phasthai' twice in B 8.8 (cf. 'anônumon' at B 8.17).
'Legein' and 'phasthai' mean 'say', not 'say truly' or 'say
successfully' (the Greek for which is 'alêtheuein'); and the contexts of
their occurrence imply that 'say' and 'noein' share at least one

important logical feature: they both stand in the same relation to 'being'. In this respect it is 'think that *P*' and 'think of *X*', rather than 'know that *P*' and 'know *X*', which parallel 'say that *P*' and 'mention *X*'; and that fact, I think, establishes the traditional translation of '*noein*'.

So much for the meaning of '*noêsai*'. All, however, is not yet plain; for the syntax of '*esti noêsai*' is disputed. Phrases of the form *esti* + infinitive recur later in the poem, and their presence is indicated in my translation by phrases of the rebarbative form 'is (are) for $\phi$ing'. The usage, which is not uncommon in Greek, has connexions with the 'potential' use of '*esti*'. (*Esti* with infinitive often means 'it is possible to . . .'. In that case '*esti*' is 'impersonal', whereas in our locution it always has a subject, explicit or implicit.) Indeed, it seems to me reasonable to gloss '*a* is for $\phi$ing' either by '*a* can $\phi$' or by '*a* can be $\phi$ed'—the context will determine whether active or passive is appropriate. Thus in **148**.2 'are for thinking of' means 'can be thought of'.[7] Observe that the gloss differs from its original in one important feature. The grammatical form of the phrase '*a* is for $\phi$ing' may seduce us into making a fallacious deduction: from '*a* is for $\phi$ing' it is easy to infer '*a* is'. The grammatical form of the gloss does not provide the same temptation. The point may assume significance later.

Then what roads of enquiry can be thought of? **148** mentions two roads: Road (A) is described in line 3, and proved by line 4 to be the Way of Truth; Road (B) is the 'track beyond all tidings', delineated in line 5. **150**. 3–4 also mentions two roads: Road (C), described in lines 4–9, is that 'along which mortals . . . wander', and it is therefore the Way of Opinion. The 'first road' of line 3 also has pitfalls (for the goddess 'restrains' Parmenides from it); and it cannot therefore be identical with Road (A), the Way of Truth. Now lines 1–2 contain the end of an argument concerned with this 'first road'; and, as I shall show, it is plausible to find the beginning of the argument in **148**. 7–8, which starts to recount the horrors of the 'track beyond all tidings'. If that is so, then the 'first road' of **150** is identical with Road (B); and in consequence Road (B), the 'track beyond all tidings', is not the Way of Opinion.

**148** and **150** show Parmenides at a crossroads, faced by three possible paths of inquiry: (A) the Way of Truth; (B) the 'track beyond all tidings' and (C) the Way of Opinion.[8] The first duty of the goddess is to characterize those three roads in a logically perspicuous fashion. Road (A) maintains 'both that it is (*esti*) and that it is not for not being' (**148**. 3);[9] Road (B) maintains 'both that it is not and that it is necessary for it not to be' (**148**. 5); Road (C) is not

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explicitly described in comparable terms, but must have maintained 'both that it is and that it is not' (cf. **150. 8**).

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

We can distinguish between a complete and an incomplete use of '*einai*': sometimes a sentence of the form '*X esti*' expresses a complete proposition; sometimes '*esti*' occurs in sentences of the form '*X esti Y*' (or the form '*X esti*' is elliptical for '*X esti Y*'). In its complete use, '*einai*' sometimes has an existential sense '*ho theos esti*' is the Greek for 'god exists'; '*ouk esti kentauros*' means 'Centaurs do not exist'. In its incomplete use, '*einai*' often serves as a copula, and the use is called predicative: '*Sôkratês esti sophos*' is Greek for 'Socrates is wise'; '*hoi leontes ouk eisin hêmeroi*' means 'Lions are not tame'. Many scholars think that Parmenides' original sin was a confusion, or fusion, of the existential with the predicative '*einai*'; and they believe that the characterization of the three roads in **148** catches Parmenides *in flagrante delicto*. If we ask what sense '*esti*' has in line 3, the answer is disappointing: '*esti*' attempts, hopelessly, to combine the two senses of 'exists' and 'is *Y*'.[11]

Now I do not wish to maintain that Parmenides was conscious of the distinction between an existential and a predicative use of '*einai*'; credit for bringing that distinction to philosophical consciousness is usually given to Plato. But I do reject the claim that **148** fuses or confuses the two uses of the verb. I see no reason to impute such a confusion to the characterization of the three roads; for I see no trace of a predicative 'is' in that characterization. The point can be simply supported: Road (B) rules out '*X* is not'; if we read 'is' predicatively, we must suppose Parmenides to be abjuring all negative predications. to be spurning all sentences of the form '*X* is not *F*'. Such a high-handed dismissal of negation is absurd; it is suggested by nothing in Parmenides' poem; and it is adequately outlawed by such lines as **B 8.22**, which show Parmenides happy to accept formulae of the form '*X* is not *F*'.[12] '*Esti*', in the passages we are concerned with, is not a copula.

Then is '*esti*' existential? Aristotle distinguishes what has been called a 'veridical' use of '*esti*'; '*X esti*', in this use, is complete, and

'*esti*' means '. . . is the case' or '. . . is true'. If Socrates asserts that cobblers are good at making shoes, his interlocutor may reply '*Esti tauta*', 'Those things are' or 'That's true'. It has been suggested that Parmenides' complete '*esti*' is veridical, not existential.

That suggestion can be accommodated, I think, to **148** and **150**; but the accommodation is not easy, nor (as far as I can see) does it have any philosophical merit. In any event, the suggestion breaks on the rocks of **B 8**: in that fragment, Parmenides sets himself to infer a number of properties of $X$ from the premiss that $X$ *esti*. None of those properties consists with the veridical reading of '*esti*': the very first inference is that $X$ is ungenerated; and if it is not, strictly speaking, impossible to take '$X$' in '$X$ is ungenerated' to stand for the sort of propositional entity of which veridical '*esti*' is predicable, it is grossly implausible to do so, and the implausibility mounts to giant proportions as the inferences of **B 8** proceed. Since the inferences in **B 8** are tied to the '*esti*' of **148** and **150**, the veridical reading of '*esti*' in those fragments can only be maintained at the cost of ascribing to Parmenides a confusion between veridical and non-veridical '*einai*'. And I see no reason for making that derogatory ascription.[13]

Existential '*einai*' remains. The obvious and the orthodox interpretation of '*esti*' in **148** and **150** is existential; and that interpretation is felicitous: it does not perform the impossible task of presenting Parmenides with a set of doctrines which are true, but it does give Parmenides a metaphysical outlook which is intelligible, coherent and peculiarly plausible. I shall continue to translate Parmenides' '*einai*' by 'be'; but I shall paraphrase it by 'exist'.

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

fish?—Eat it'. Here there is no question of finding a logical subject for the predicate '$\phi$s': 'it' does not name or refer to any particular individual.

One standard view gives '*esti*' in **148**.3 a logical subject: that subject is 'Being'; and Road (A) asserts, bluntly, that Being exists. I am at a loss to understand that assertion; what in the world can be meant by 'Being exists'? Nevertheless, behind abstract Being there lurks a more concrete candidate for the post of logical subject: '*to eon*', 'what is'. Should we gloss '*esti*' as 'what is, is'?[15]

Phrases of the form 'what $\phi$s' do not always serve as logical subjects: 'what $\phi$s' may mean 'whatever $\phi$s' ('What's done cannot be undone'); and then 'what $\phi$s $\psi$s' means 'for any $x$: if $x$ $\phi$s, $x$ $\psi$s'. Thus we might gloss Parmenides' '*esti*' by 'what is, is', and yet deny that 'what is' is a logical subject; for we might explain the phrase by 'what*ever* is, is'. Road (A), on that view, maintains that whatever exists exists and cannot not exist. It has been objected to that interpretation that Parmenides attempts to prove that Road (A) is right, and Roads (B) and (C) mistaken; but that the interpretation makes (A) tautologous, and hence in no need of proof, and (B) and (C) contradictory, and hence in no need of disproof. But the objection is doubly mistaken: first, tautologies can, and sometimes should, be proved; and contradictions can, and sometimes should, be disproved. Second, Road (A) does not turn out tautologous; since it is far from a tautology that what exists *cannot not exist*.

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

Nevertheless, I do not believe that '*to eon*', on either interpretation, is a likely supplement to Parmenides' '*esti*'. The reason is simple: nothing in the context of **148** could reasonably suggest to even the most careful reader that by 'it is' Parmenides meant 'what is, is'. The term 'what is' does not appear in **B 1** or in **148**; and it is not the sort of term a reader would naturally supply for himself.[16]

A close investigation of the context of **148** has supplemented '*esti*' in a different way: instead of 'what is', supply 'what can be thought

of' or 'what can be known'. Road (A) then says that 'what can be thought of exists'; and 'Parmenides' real starting-point is . . . the possibility of rational discourse' or of thought.[17] My objection to that suggestion is a weaker version of my objection to '*to eon*': nothing in the introductory context of 148 suggests such a supplement for '*esti*' at line 3; reflexion on the subsequent argument may indeed lead us to 'what can be thought of', but it will also lead us to berate Parmenides for a gratuitously roundabout and allusive way of expressing himself; for the most careful reader, on this view, will only understand the crucial lines of 148 after he has read a quantity of later verses.

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

Thus Road (A) says that *whatever we inquire into* exists, and cannot not exist: Parmenides' starting-point is the possibility, not exactly of rational thought, but of scientific research. The immediate context of 148, and the general atmosphere of **B 1**, make that an intelligible way of understanding the goddess's roads; the argument about the relative merits of the three roads is, as we shall see, thoroughly consonant with the interpretation; and we find Parmenides, in a historically appropriate fashion, investigating the logical foundations of the programme of the early Greek philosophers.

If the '*esti*' of 148 is now explained, the characterization of the three roads is still not completely clear: two uncertainties remain. First, are the objects of inquiry to be specified by singular or by general terms? does road (A) say that if anyone studies things of a given sort (stars, winds, horses) then there must exist things of that sort? or does it say that if anyone studies any individual object (the sun, Boreas, Pegasus) then that object must exist? Philosophers' attitudes to Parmenides' argument may differ according to which

alternative we choose; but nothing in the poem indicates that Parmenides saw two alternatives here, and had he done so he might, I think, have decided to embrace their conjunction.

Second, how are we to interpret the modal operators in the second half of lines 3 and 5? Road (A) maintains that what is inquired into 'is not for not being' or 'cannot not be'; Road (B) holds of what is inquired into that 'it is necessary for it not to be'. Road (A) states that objects of inquiry necessarily exist, Road (B) that they necessarily do not exist; does 'necessarily' here mark *necessitas consequentis* or *necessitas consequentiae*? does Road (A) state:

(1) If a thing is studied, it has the property of necessary existence, or rather:

(2) It is necessarily true that anything studied exists?

I cannot tell if Parmenides' Greek favours either (1) or (2); and I suppose that Parmenides did not see that two distinct propositions were on view: confusion between *necessitas consequentis* and *necessitas consequentiae* is distressingly common.

Let me now try to characterize Roads (A) and (B) a little more formally: I use '$\Box$ P' to abbreviate 'necessarily P'. Each Road has four possible formulations:

(A1) $(\forall x)$ ( if $x$ is studied, $\Box x$ exists).

(A2) $(\forall \phi)$ (if $\phi$s are studied, $\Box$ there exist $\phi$s).

(A3) $\Box (\forall x)$ (if $x$ is studied, $x$ exists).

(A4) $\Box (\forall \phi)$ (if $\phi$s are studied, there exist $\phi$s).

(B1) $(\forall x)$ (if $x$ is studied, $\Box x$ does not exist).

(B2) $(\forall \phi)$ (if $\phi$s are studied, $\Box$ there exist no $\phi$s).

(B3) $\Box (\forall x)$ (if $x$ is studied, $x$ does not exist).

(B4) $\Box (\forall \phi)$ (if $\phi$s are studied, there exist no $\phi$s).

If we ignore the distinction between '$x$ exists' and 'there exist $\phi$s', we may limit ourselves to two versions of Roads (A) and (B); how, then, are we to formulate road (C), the Way of Opinion?

There are three aids to formulation: Road (C) is the road of ordinary mortals; it is expressible, vaguely enough, by the phrase 'it is and it is not'; and the triad of (A), (B) and (C) includes all the conceivable paths of thought. The first version of (A) and (B) gives:

I (Ai) $(\forall X)$ (if $X$ is studied, $\Box X$ exists).

(Bi) $(\forall X)$ (if $X$ is studied, $\Box X$ does not exist).

For (C) we might perhaps imagine:

(Ci1) $(\forall X)$ (if $X$ is studied, $\Box X$ exists & $\Box X$ does not exist).

or else:

(Ci2) $(\exists X)$ ($X$ is studied & $\Box X$ exists) &

$(\exists X)$ ($X$ is studied & $\Box X$ does not exist).

If the triad of roads is to be genuinely exhaustive, we need rather:

(Ci3) ($\exists X$) ($X$ is studied & not-$\Box$ $X$ exists)
      & ($\exists X$) ($X$ is studied & $\Box$ $X$ exists).

The second version of (A) and (B) yields:

II    (Aii)  $\Box$($\forall X$) (if $X$ is studied, $X$ exists).

      (Bii)  $\Box$($\forall X$) (if $X$ is studied, $X$ does not exist).

And then for Road (C) we may offer:

    (Cii1) $\Box$($\forall X$) (if $X$ is studied, $X$ exists & $X$ does not exist).

    (Cii2) $\Box$($\exists X$) ($X$ is studied & $X$ exists) &

            ($\exists X$) ($X$ is studied & $X$ does not exist)

    (Cii3) $\Diamond$($\exists X$) ($X$ is studied & $X$ does not exist)

          $\Diamond$($\exists X$) ($X$ is studied & $X$ exists).

(In (Cii3), '$\Diamond$' abbreviates 'possibly'.)

I state these possibilities neither to bemuse the reader nor to exhibit my own virtuosity: their statement is a necessary preliminary to any examination of Parmenides' metaphysics; and if we are to treat his argument with the respect it deserves, we must be prepared to analyse its components with a rigour that Parmenides himself was not equipped to supply. I turn now to the argument itself.


### (c) *The paths of ignorance*

The argument against Road (B) begins in 148. 6–8. Line 8 is a half line, and so is 149: the two halves make a metrical and a rational whole, and I assume that 149 is in fact continuous with 148. Finally, 150. 1–2 completes the case against the track beyond all tidings.

Let us take a student, $a$, and an object of study, $O$; and suppose that $a$ is studying $O$. Now first, Parmenides observes, 'neither would you recognize that which is not . . . nor mention it'; i.e.

(1)  ($\forall X$) (if $X$ does not exist, then no one can recognize $X$ and no one can mention $X$).

From (1) we infer:

(2)  If $O$ does not exist, then $a$ cannot recognize $O$, and $a$ cannot mention $O$.

But why should we credit (1)? It is not, after all, a particularly plausible thesis on the face of it. 149 comes next in our text; and it amounts to: 'Whatever can be thought of can exist, and vice versa'; i.e.

(3)  ($\forall X$) ($X$ can be thought of if and only if $X$ can exist).

Now (3) yields:

(4)  If $a$ can think of $O$, then $O$ can exist.

But (4) does not offer us any immediate help.[18]

Let us, then, try 150. 1–2. 'What is for saying and for thinking of must be': a plausible translation is:

(5)  $\Box(\forall X)$ (if $X$ can be mentioned or $X$ can be thought of, then $X$ exists).

Now (5) gives:

(6) If $a$ can mention $O$ or $a$ can think of $O$, then $O$ exists.

Let us ascribe another premiss to Parmenides, viz:

(7) $(\forall X)$ (if $X$ can be recognized, $X$ can be thought of)

and let us infer from (7) to:

(8) If $a$ can recognize $O$, then $a$ can think of $O$.

Now we have an argument for (2); for (6) and (8) together entail (2).

So far, (3) has done no work, and (5) is unsupported. **150**.1 continues: 'for it is for being'; i.e., 'for what is for saying and for thinking is for being', or:

(9) $(\forall X)$ (if $X$ can be mentioned or $X$ can be thought of, then $X$ can exist)

whence:

(10) If $a$ can mention $O$, $O$ can exist.

There remains the first clause of **150**.2, 'but nothing is not'. That means, of course, 'But nothing is not for being', i.e., 'nothing cannot exist'. Now 'nothing *(mêden)*' is used as a synonym for *'to mê on'*, 'what is not' (cf. **B** 8.10); so that we have:

(11) $(\forall X)$ (if $X$ does not exist, $X$ cannot exist);

whence:

(12) If $O$ does not exist, $O$ cannot exist.

Proposition (3) can now be put to use; for (4), (10) and (12) together entail (6).

Let us now suppose that Road (B) is the one $a$ chooses to follow in his inquiry; whether we pick (Bi) or (Bii) we can infer:

(13) If $a$ studies $O$, $O$ does not exist.

Now it is evidently true that students must be able to say what they are studying, or at least to recognize the objects of their inquiries; i.e.

(14) $(\forall X)$ (if $X$ is studied, then $X$ can be mentioned or $X$ can be recognized).

Hence:

(15) If $a$ studies $O$, then $a$ can mention $O$ or $a$ can recognize $O$.

But if $a$ studies $O$, we can now infer, from (6), (15) and (13), that $O$ exists and $O$ does not exist. But that is impossible; hence if $a$ is a student, (13) is false; and, in general, no student can proceed along Road (B). And that completes Parmenides' argument: Road (B) is indeed a track beyond all tidings.

My reconstruction has been laborious; and it may be of use if I state more briefly the train of argument it ascribes to Parmenides. First, premiss (9) [ = **150**.1] gives (10), and premiss (3) [ = **149**] gives (4). Then premiss (11) [ = **150**.2] gives (12); and (4), (10) and (12)

together yield (6) [cf. **150**.1]. A new premiss, (7), gives (8); and (6) and (8) entail (2). A further new premiss, (14), gives (15). Assume that there are students, and that they follow Road (B). Then via (13), we meet with an explicit contradiction. And that licenses the rejection of our assumption.

The argument is, I claim, subtle and ingenious. (I offer a symbolized version in the Appendix to this chapter.) I suppose that it convinced Parmenides of the pointlessness of Road (B). Yet as it stands, in naked rigour, it shows at least one ugly blemish: premiss (11) is false, and obviously false. Not all nonentities are *impossibilia*: many things might, but do not, exist. So obvious and so offensive a flaw may be thought to show that the argument I have constructed cannot have been propounded by a thinker of Parmenides' calibre. But to say that is to ignore the seductive powers which certain falsehoods may have when they are stated informally in ordinary English or in ordinary Greek. Premiss (11) is conveyed by some such sentence as 'what doesn't exist can't exist'; and that sentence is an 'untruism'; that is to say, it is an ambiguous sentence expressing, on one interpretation, a trivial truth and on another, a substantial falsity. 'Nothing is not for being', or 'What doesn't exist can't exist', may mean either:

(16) It is not possible that what does not exist exists;

or else:

(17) If a thing does not exist, then it is not possible for it to exist.

Either:

(16a) □ (if *a* does not exist, *a* does not exist),

or

(17a) If *a* does not exist, □ (*a* does not exist).

If Parmenides' sentence is interpreted as (16) it is true; but it does not yield (11). If it is interpreted as (17) it yields (11); but it is false. Parmenides, I suggest, was blind to the ambiguity of the sentence he used: he supposed that he could, as it were, take advantage in one and the same proposition, both of the truth of (16) and of the logical implications of (17). Parmenides' philosophy rests, if I am right, on an untruism; it is some slight consolation that his was by no means the last system to be built on such a sandy foundation.

I turn now to Road (C). Scholars have given **150** a quantity of attention; for some have found in it evidence that Parmenides was attacking Heraclitus. The evidence is weak—an alleged verbal echo or two—and since Road (C) is the Way of Opinion, which most mortals tread, Heraclitus is at best one of its travellers and not a lone rambler. If Parmenides has Heraclitus in mind at all (which I doubt), it is only as a particularly striking representative of all that is bad in mortal opinions.[19]

However that may be, my present interest centres on the reasons for Parmenides' rejection of (C) rather than on the protagonists of the rejected view; and 151 provides a better starting-point than 150.

'For never will this be proved—that things that are not are'. No doubt; but what is that to the travellers on Road (C)? A very simple argument suggests itself: (C) is committed to the view that at least some objects of inquiry do not, or may not, exist. Suppose that O is such an object: then by 151.1, since O does not exist, it will never be shown that O does exist; but the argument against Road (B) showed precisely that O, if it is an object of inquiry, does exist. Thus Road (C) leads to contradiction and must be abandoned.

In short, Road (C) leads nowhere for the same reasons that (B) leads nowhere; and the argument against (B) applies immediately to (C). That does not imply, as some scholars have feared, that (B) and (C) somehow fail to be genuine alternatives: if a mine wrecks two bridges at once, it does not follow that the bridges only offered one way across the river. And anyone who has argued against (B) in the Parmenidean mode will hardly fail to see that his argument can be deployed against (C).

What, then, of 150? Most of the fragment is abuse; yet the last three lines appear to offer an argument against Road (C) which is distinct from the one I have just extracted from 151.1–2. In 150.7 Parmenides asserts that men wander about 'deaf alike and blind, gawping, creatures of no judgment'; and in line 9 he concludes that 'the path of all is backward turning (*palintropos*)'.[20] To say that a man's path turns backward is presumably to say that he contradicts himself; and we should expect to find in line 8 something which is, or directly implies, a contradiction. Our expectations are not disappointed: line 8 brims with contradictory-looking phrases. The problem is to determine which of them Parmenides meant to saddle mortals with: we need not suppose that, in Parmenides' view, ordinary men are given to uttering explicit contradictions; he means only that men are committed to contradictions. But committed to what contradictions? and why?

The Greek of line 8 has been deemed to allow at least three translations:

(i) 'By whom both to be and not to be are thought to be the same and not the same';

(ii) 'By whom it is thought both to be and not to be both the same and not the same';

(iii) 'By whom it is thought both to be and not to be, both to be the same and not to be the same'.

Translation (i) ascribes to mortals the compound contradiction:

(18) (Being = not-being) & (Being ≠ not-being).
But (18) is a strange proposition; and I cannot concoct any line of reasoning that plausibly produces it from mortal opinions.

Translation (ii) has often suggested a simple interpretation: according to ordinary folk, many things change and yet retain their identity; thus, in an obvious sense, men are committed to the view that things are and are not the same (hence, equivalently, that they are and are not not the same). Translation (iii) may well be construed in a similar fashion: by allowing generation and destruction, mortals commit themselves to propositions of the form '*a* is and *a* is not'; by allowing alteration, they commit themselves to '*a* is the same and *a* is not the same'.

Grammar, I think, favours (iii) over (ii);[21] and (iii), on this interpretation, offers a thicker sense. But a weighty argument tells against (ii) and the interpretation of (iii) in terms of change: the interpreters will have it that Parmenides finds contradiction in men's ordinary talk of change. Now fragment **B 8** contains a long and intricate argument against the possibility of change and generation; and that argument rests upon the foundation of Road (A). Are we to suppose that in his attack on Road (C), in a fragment which only prepares the ground for the major deductions of **B 8**, Parmenides can have anticipated, without apology, the main and most striking conclusion of those deductions? Parmenides was not so cack-handed a fellow: the abolition of change is the business of **B 8**, and it cannot have been presupposed in **150**.

Translation (iii) does not have to be interpreted in terms of generation and change. I quote a sentence from the *Dissoi Logoi* (see below, p. 517):

> And the same things exist and do not exist; for the things that exist here do not exist in Libya, and those in Libya do not exist in Cyprus; and the same goes for everything else. Thus things both exist and do not exist (**152:90A5**, §5).

Ask a man in Libya if there exist any lions, and he will give you a fearful affirmative; ask the same man in the peaceful streets of Athens 'Are there any lions?'—he will answer 'By the dog, no'. Conjoin the replies, each of which seems ordinary and respectable, and the result is contradiction: 'There are and there are not lions'. Again, it is the same things that are and are not; for it is lions which are said to be, and lions which are said not to be. But evidently the lions which *are*, the Libyan lions, are beasts of a far tougher character than those Athenian animals which do not exist. Lions, in sum, 'are and are not, are the same and not the same'.

That interpretation of line 8 seems to me the least implausible. But the reasoning it ascribes to Parmenides will stand no weight; and it is fortunate that Parmenides need set no weight on it. For, as I have argued, in rejecting Road (B), Parmenides has said quite enough to reject Road (C) too: Road (A) alone is left for intellectual travellers.

Parmenides draws a moral from his rejections of Road (C):

Do not let much-experienced habit force you along this road,
to let run an aimless eye and an echoing ear
and a tongue; but judge by argument (*logôi*) the much-
contending refutation uttered by me (**153: B 7. 3–6**).

I shall return later to the attack on sense-perception allegedly contained in these lines (below, p. 297). Here I wish to point out the positive part of Parmenides' moral: we are to judge his 'refutation' of Road (C) by 'argument' and not by appealing to experience. The request is as sound as it is simple: no amount of assertion, however well grounded on sensory evidence, can show where Parmenides' reasoning fails; if we want to refute Parmenides, we must attack argument with argument, *logos* with *logos*.

This sane request was ignored by most of Parmenides' successors. I have already remarked upon the fact that the Presocratics rarely gave any critical examination of the arguments whose conclusions they opposed (above pp. 50–2). That failure is nowhere more evident than in the reaction to Parmenides: later thinkers knew that his conclusions were unacceptable; but they could not, or would not, say where his arguments broke down. Parmenides saw where his opponents' task lay better than they did themselves. And in attempting to analyse Parmenides' argument, and to show where it goes wrong, I have done no more than follow Parmenides' own advice.

Parmenides' attack on Road (B) fails, and with it his attack on Road (C); consequently, he fails to show that Road (A) is the only traversable road. Can we perhaps come to Parmenides' support and offer him more powerful weapons from our own logical arsenal? We might attempt to save him at any of three points. First, we might attempt to support proposition (5) of his argument: what can be mentioned or thought of exists. Of modern philosophers, only Berkeley would dare to defend Parmenides here; for Berkeley held that whatever is thought of exists. I quote his notorious argument: 'But say you, surely there is nothing easier than to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and nobody by to perceive them. I answer, you may so, there is no difficulty in it: but what is all this, I beseech you, more than framing in your mind

certain ideas which you call *books* and *trees*, and at the same time omitting to frame the idea of any one that may perceive them? *but do not you yourself perceive or think of them all the while?* this therefore is nothing to the purpose; it only shows you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind; but it does not show that you can conceive it possible the objects of your thought may exist without the mind: to make out this, *it is necessary that you can conceive them existing unconceived or unthought of, which is a manifest repugnancy*' (*Principles of Human Knowledge*, § 23). Berkeley's argument is in direct line of descent from Parmenides. It is fallacious (though the fallacy is interestingly elusive); and Berkeley's Parmenidean conclusion will not stand. 'For Scylla and Chimaera, and many non-entities, are', as the Sophist Gorgias said, 'thought upon' (82 B 3, § 80). We do think of unicorns and centaurs, of Zeus and Jehovah, of phlogiston and the luminiferous ether; and such objects do not exist. Existential questions can be sensibly entertained; I can wonder whether Homer existed or whether there really ever were any dodos. And the fact that such questions can be posed is sufficient to show that non-entities can be thought upon.

If proposition (5) is indefensible, perhaps we can take a stand on (1), and agree that anything that can be recognized or mentioned must exist? Surprisingly many philosophers will defend Parmenides at that point: perhaps we can think of non-entities; but we certainly cannot mention them or discourse about them. If I am to mention an object, then I must be able to predicate things of it, to identify it, to refer to it; but we cannot ascribe properties to non-entities; we cannot identify the non-existent; we cannot refer to things which are not there for referring—what is for speaking of, must be.

That popular argument is, I think, mistaken; but it requires more consideration than I can give it here.[22] We do, in our unphilosophical moments, imagine that we can talk about non-entities: myth-ographers refer felicitously to Scylla and Chimaera; scientists will talk dismissively about phlogiston; and literary critics will write you a book about Hamlet at the drop of a hat. And if it is allowed that we can *think* of non-entities, surely it must follow that we can *identify* and *refer to* non-entities? In order to think about Pegasus, I must somehow pick out that mythical beast for myself; and if I can pick him out, mentally, for myself, why can I not pick him out, linguistically, for you? I do not pretend that talking about the non-existent is easily analysed; but it is easily done. And that is enough to dispose of Parmenides' proposition (1).

If we can salvage none of Parmenides' argument, may we save his conclusion, that Road (A) is the only traversable path? that objects of

enquiry, at least, must exist? Again, many philosophers, allowing thought of and reference to the non-existent, might finally agree that the non-existent cannot be the object of scientific research: 'a thing must exist if we are to study it or institute inquiries concerning its nature and properties'.[23] Aristotle, in whose view science started from the *ousia* or essence of things, held that only entities have an essence, so that scientific inquiry is restricted to the things that really exist. According to Locke, 'real' knowledge must bear upon real objects; otherwise it is vain and alchimerical (*Essay* IV.iv). And if Locke argues not that knowledge of non-entities is impossible but only that it is fatuous and footling, nevertheless it is not hard to find a stricter, Parmenidean thesis below the surface of his text: zoologists study horses, not unicorns; chemists study oxygen, not phlogiston; historians study Shakespeare, not Hamlet.

But surely mythologists study unicorns, not horses; historians of science study phlogiston before oxygen; and literary men may inquire into the character of Hamlet rather than of Shakespeare? A tough-minded Parmenidean may argue that mythologists are really investigating not the nature of non-existent beasts but the beliefs of once-existent men, and that literary critics inquire into the intentions of Shakespeare and not the character of his fictions; and he might further suppose that historians really study the present traces of past ages and not those ages themselves. The argument deserves lengthy development; but in the end it is, I think, unconvincing. Nor can it account for the efforts of the paradigmatic inquirers; for natural scientists regularly study idealized entities: the objects of their theories are not the rough and ready physical bodies of our mundane world, but ideal approximations to them; they study frictionless surfaces, not ordinary tables or desks; they talk of an isolated system, not of a piece of our messy world. Physics is the most unreal of sciences.

We can and do think of things that do not exist; we can and do talk of things that do not exist; we can and do study things that do not exist. Such thoughts, such discourses, and such studies are not always fatuous. Parmenides has given us no good reason to reject those ordinary opinions; and in consequence his metaphysics is based upon a falsehood and defended by a specious argument. But for all that, Parmenides' views on the objects of inquiry are not merely antique exhibits in the roomy museum of philosophical follies: the arguments he adduces, though unsound, are ingenious and admirable; their conclusion, though false, has a strange plausibility and attractiveness. Many eminent philosophers have struck Parmenidean attitudes, and have done so for essentially Parmenidean reasons.

## (d) *Gorgias on what is not*

Gorgias of Leontini 'in his book entitled *Concerning What Is Not or Concerning Nature* establishes three points—first, that nothing exists; second, that even if anything exists, it is inapprehensible to mankind; third, that even if it is apprehensible, at all events it is incommunicable and inexpressible to a neighbour' (Sextus, *adv Math* VII.65 = **82 B 3**). Gorgias was active in the last third of the fifth century; he was, at least primarily, a rhetorician; but his bizarre tract *Concerning What Is Not* has close connexions with Eleatic philosophy, and those connexions win it a place in a book on Presocratic argument.[24]

Some scholars make Gorgias a profound thinker, a nihilist and a sceptic; others treat *What Is Not* as a serious and witty *reductio* of Eleatic metaphysics; others again take it for a rhetorical *tour de force* or a sophisticated joke. A similar problem arises in connexion with Gorgias' *Helen*, which I discuss in a later chapter (below, pp. 523–30). I do not know what Gorgias intended me to think of his two pamphlets; nor do I lament that ignorance. Whatever Gorgias may have thought, his writings contain matters of some interest, and I shall take his writings (if not their author) seriously.

We do not possess the original text of *What Is Not*; instead, we have two paraphrases, one by Sextus (*adv Math* VII.66–86 = **82 B 3**) and the other in the *MXG* (979a10–980b22). I shall follow Sextus' account both because the text of the *MXG* is wretchedly corrupt and because Sextus' presentation and argument are, in my view, regularly superior to those of the *MXG*.[25]

Here I quote without comment the second part of Gorgias' treatise. The first and the third parts will be found on later pages (below, pp. 182, 471). Passages in square brackets are Sextan comments; and Sextus' paragraph numbers are included for ease of reference.

(77) [It must next be shown that even if anything exists it is unknowable (*agnôston*) and unthinkable (*anepinoêton*) by mankind.] If what is thought of (*ta phronoumena*) [says Gorgias] is not existent, then what exists is not thought of. [And that is reasonable; for just as, if being white belongs to what is thought of, then being thought of belongs to what is white, so if not being existent belongs to what is thought of, of necessity not being thought of will belong to what exists. (78) Hence 'If what is thought of is not existent, then what exists is not thought of' is sound and preserves validity.] But what is thought of [for we must take this first] is not existent, as we shall establish. What exists,

therefore, is not thought of. Now that what is thought of is not existent is evident; (79) for if what is thought of is existent, then everything that is thought of exists—and that in the way in which one thinks of them. But that is not sensible. For it is not the case that if anyone thinks of a man flying or chariots running over the sea, a man thereby flies or chariots run over the sea. Hence it is not the case that what is thought of is existent.

(80) In addition, if what is thought of exists, what does not exist will not be thought of. For opposites belong to opposites, and what does not exist is opposite to what exists. And for this reason if being thought of belongs to what exists, then not being thought of will certainly belong to what does not exist. But this is absurd; for Scylla and Chimaera and many non-existent things are thought of. What exists, therefore, is not thought of.

(81) And just as what is seen is called visible because it is seen, and what is audible audible because it is heard, and we do not reject the visible because it is not heard or the audible because it is not seen (for each must be judged by its own sense and not by another), so too what is thought of will exist even if it is not seen by sight or heard by hearing, because it is grasped by its proper criterion. (82) If, then, someone thinks that chariots run over the sea, even if he does not see them, he must believe that chariots running over the sea exist. But this is absurd. What exists, therefore, is not thought of and apprehended (154).

## Appendix: *A formalization of Parmenides' argument*

'$M\alpha\beta$' abbreviates '$\alpha$ mentions $\beta$'; '$T\alpha\beta$', '$\alpha$ thinks of $\beta$'; '$R\alpha\beta$', '$\alpha$ recognizes $\beta$';'$S\alpha\beta$', '$\alpha$ studies $\beta$'; '$E\alpha$', '$\alpha$ exists'. Numerals in square brackets pair lines of the formalization with the steps in the informal presentation of section (c).

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | (1) | $(\forall x)(\forall y)(Sxy \rightarrow \sim Ey)$ | A [(Bii)] |
| 2 | (2) | $(\exists x)(\exists y)Sxy$ | A |
| 3 | (3) | $(\exists y)Say$ | A |
| 4 | (4) | $Sab$ | A |
| 5 | (5) | $(\forall y)(((\exists x) \Diamond Mxy \vee (\exists x) \Diamond Txy) \rightarrow \Diamond Ey)$ | A [(9)] |
| 6 | (6) | $(\forall x)(\forall y)(\Diamond Txy \leftrightarrow \Diamond Ey)$ | A [(3)] |
| 7 | (7) | $(\forall y)(\sim Ey \rightarrow \sim \Diamond Ey)$ | A [(11)] |
| 8 | (8) | $(\forall x)(\forall y)(\Diamond Rxy \rightarrow \Diamond Txy)$ | A [(7)] |
| 9 | (9) | $(\forall x)(\forall y)(Sxy \rightarrow (\Diamond Mxy \vee \Diamond Rxy))$ | A [(14)] |
| 1 | (10) | $Sab \rightarrow \sim Eb$ | 1,UE [(13)] |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1, 4 | (11) | $\sim Eb$ | 4, 10, MPP |
| 9 | (12) | $Sab \rightarrow (\Diamond Mab \vee \Diamond Rab)$ | 9, UE [(15)] |
| 4, 9 | (13) | $\Diamond Mab \vee \Diamond Rab$ | 4, 12, MPP |
| 8 | (14) | $\Diamond Rab \rightarrow \Diamond Tab$ | 8, UE [(8)] |
| 4, 8, 9 | (15) | $\Diamond Mab \vee \Diamond Tab$ | 13, 14 T |
| 5 | (16) | $((\exists x) \Diamond Mxb \vee (\exists x) \Diamond Txb) \rightarrow \Diamond Eb$   5, UE | |
| 6 | (17) | $\Diamond Tab \leftrightarrow \Diamond Eb$ | 6, UE [cf. (4)] |
| 18 | (18) | $\Diamond Mab$ | A |
| 18 | (19) | $(\exists x) \Diamond Mxb$ | 18, EI |
| 5, 18 | (20) | $\Diamond Eb$ | 16, 19, T |
| 21 | (21) | $\Diamond Tab$ | A |
| 6, 21 | (22) | $\Diamond Eb$ | 17, 21, T |
| 4, 5, 6, 8, 9 | (23) | $\Diamond Eb$ | 15, 18, 20, 21, 22, v E |
| 7 | (24) | $\sim Eb \rightarrow \sim \Diamond Eb$ | 7, UE |
| 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 | (25) | $Eb$ | 23, 24, MTT |
| 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 | (26) | $Eb \& \sim Eb$ | 25, 11 & I |
| 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 | (27) | $\sim(\forall x)(\forall y)(Sxy \rightarrow \sim Ey)$ | 1, 26 RAA |
| 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 | (28) | $\sim(\forall x)(\forall y)(Sxy \rightarrow \sim Ey)$ | 3, 4, 27 EE; 2, 3, 27 EE |

The argument is, I think, formally valid. ('T' stands for 'tautology'; the other rules are standard.) It is not elegant; but I blame its lack of beauty on Parmenides.