Knowing the One: Provisionality in Parmenides and Plato

The notion of the one is a central element in the thought of Parmenides and Plato. At issue are two relationships: that between one and many, and that being and becoming, and the possibility of acquiring knowledge about these relationships. Parmenides is traditionally understood as unequivocally equating being, one and thought with one another; hence denying multiplicity and becoming while proclaiming that all that can be known is unchanging being. Following Reiner Schürmann’s reading in his essay “Tragic Differing: The Law of the One and the Law of the Contraries in Parmenides,” which emphasizes the symmetry of the ascent and descent of the narrative journey presented in Parmenides’ poem, we find that Parmenides actually speaks to the mortal inescapability of difference and the need to bring an intuitive understanding of the one and being to our everyday dealings with difference and becoming if we wish to act in accord with Justice. Plato may be seen as both integrating and surpassing the thought of his predecessor. In his dialogue Parmenides a one that is prior to being is demonstrated to be unthinkable, and the notion of participation is shown to be a way of conceiving the inconceivable. Similarly the Republic presents a Good that is above being, yet apprehendable to the extent that it enables the perception of eternal forms. The ascent of knowledge presented in the Pheadrus again suggests the potential for approaching eternal being while denying the possibility of full knowledge, and reinforces the notion that our search is erotically fueled.

In his poem Parmenides narrates his ascent from the doxa of the mortal world, marked by contraries and becoming, to the aletheia of the immortal realm, in which a goddess teaches him that true being is one, unmoving, unchanging and uniform, and subsequent descent as the goddess describes a reverse passage from aletheia back to doxa. While in many ways Parmenides presents himself as being the passive recipient of revelation — he is carried by “wise horses” and
escorted by “daughters of the sun” who have “thrust the veils from their heads with their hands” to learn from a goddess — he also characterizes himself as an active seeker, writing that he is a “man who knows”, carried “as far as my heart ever aspires,” his wheels “blazing.” Passage to the goddess’ realm is marked by moving through two dual gates onto “the broad way”:

There are the gates of the paths of Night and Day, and a lintel and a stone threshold enclose them. They themselves, high in the air, are blocked with great doors, and avenging Justice holds the alternate bolts. Her the maidens beguiled with gentle words and cunningly persuaded to push back swiftly from the gates the bolted bar. And the gates created a yawning gap in the door frame when they flew open, swinging in turn in their sockets the bronzed-bound pivots made fast with dowels and rivets. Straight through them, on the broad way, did the maidens keep the horses and the chariots. (288)

This transition from the two paths and gates of a pair of contraries yoked together by the same stone threshold to their opening onto a single broad path marks Parmenides’ passage from doxa to aletheia, a transition that is mirrored on the return journey. Having just explained the unity of being revealed by aletheia, the goddess explains human doxa as follows:

For they [mortals] made up their minds to name two forms, of which they needs must not name so much as one — that is where they have gone astray — and distinguished them as opposite in appearance and assigned to them signs different one from the other — to one the aitherial flame of fire, gentle and very light, in every direction with itself, but not with the other; and that other too is in itself just the opposite, dark night, dense in appearance and heavy. (302)

Mortals are “two-headed” (293); they name two forms — when they did not even have to name one — and distinguish them as opposites. Light and night appear to represent contraries in general, for other opposites are also named: “On the right boys, on the left girls…” (309).

It is in naming that mortals have gone astray: the function of naming is to distinguish its subject from all that is not it. In that sense it is not possible to name one without implicitly naming two and setting up an oppositional relationship. As Schürmann explains, “nothing other

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but the declaring of such contraries is what makes them mortals” (9). Moving from doxa to aletheia we see that opposites are embraced by a single frame, which first presents them as essentially belonging together. Their encompassing doorway is guarded by Justice, and moving through the doorway that encompasses the dual paths we see the single broad path of aletheia. The “law of the One” that we are shown in the realm of aletheia requires us to recognize the absence that accompanies every presence in the mortal world of contraries, or as Schürmann puts it: “The One requires us to seize the other of the same in the same” (12). In so doing we are merely making explicit what we already implicitly acknowledge as we name. Seeing the other of the same in the same enables us to recognize that all mortal laws and truth are the provisional, temporary privileging of one thing over its other.

Keeping the initial unity that first requires us to introduce difference in mind will presumably cause us to act in accordance with Justice, so that both sides of an opposition receive equal weight and we acknowledge the provisionality of our stance. Not only does Justice guard the doorway of Day and Night, she also holds what is together in unchanging being: “Justice has never loosed her fetters to allow it to come to be or to perish, but holds it fast” (296). In fact, Justice performs a similar binding function as Necessity: “Remaining the same and in the same place it lies on its own and thus fixed it will remain. For strong Necessity holds it within the bonds of a limit, which keeps it in on every side” (298). Even in the goddess’ narration of the mortal opinion of creation these two are named together: “The middlemost of the mixed rings is the [primary cause] of movement and of coming into being for them all, and he calls it the goddess that steers all, the holder of the keys, Justice and Necessity” (307). While Justice and Necessity enforce unity and coherence in the goddess’ understanding by imposing permanence and determination upon being, so “that being uncreated and imperishable it is, whole and of a

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single kind and unshaken and perfect” (295), in the mortal account they do so by steering movement and becoming. Herein lies the second significant difference between doxa and aletheia: doxa admits becoming and perishing, while aletheia recognizes only eternal, unchanging, unmoving being. Yet doxa and aletheia are not opposed to one another, rather the one follows from the other on the same journey. The task seems to be to think unity and being along with duality and becoming, for it is simply not possible for us mortals to remain within the immortal realm, even if we are fortunate enough to have maidens and horses help us in our ascent.

This point becomes clear when we reflect upon the duality the goddess herself must create in her explanation of being. What is opposes what is not, and of the two paths we are instructed to reject that of non-being: “I declare to you that it is an altogether indiscernible track: for you could not know what is not — that cannot be done — nor indicate it” (291). The prohibition against pursuing what is not lies in the concomitancy of thought and being: “The same thing is there to be thought and is why there is thought. For you will not find thinking without what is, in all that has been said” (299). What is is there to be thought and we cannot think what is not. Likewise thought is for being: “What is there to be said and thought must needs be: for it is there for being, but nothing is not” (293). Kirk, Raven and Schofield explain here that ‘is’ must be taken in both its existential (‘exists’) and predicative (‘is something or other’) senses, so that to exist is to have some measure of determinancy. Thought and being belong together as both rely on determinacy, and in fact absolute determinacy is the prime characteristic of the being the goddess describes: perfect, eternal, uniform, unchanging and unmoving, being is the perfection of limit. Yet being that encompasses all opposition and difference would be unknowable. To know being and be able to describe its attributes as the

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3 Kirk, Raven and Schofield, page 245.
goddess does, we must introduce difference. What is not remains the other to being, unknowable yet nonetheless intuited as what is absent in its indeterminacy. While Parmenides may be privileged to an intuitive understanding of the unitary being that underlies all difference, this being cannot be said to be properly named or known. The various qualities and names the goddess ascribes to being in her attempt to explain the truth to Parmenides must remain in the final analysis examples of catachresis: the deliberate misuse of language as one applies names to what is in principle unnamable.

Both the error and inescapability of opposition are emphasized in Parmenides’ poem, and human knowledge is presented as at best provisional, and at worst, failing to heed the claims of Justice. Consequently Schürmann is able to write of the “tragic double-bind” that constitutes the human condition: we cannot avoid distinguishing and deciding, yet for the sake of a higher notion of Justice we must also keep present our intuition of the unity of being and the provisionality of our judgments. While Parmenides begins his poem with a sort of ecstatic retelling of his ascent to truth, an ascent dependent upon both his own knowing and desirous seeking and divine intervention, the truth he learns reveals that while he cannot help choosing, selecting, and striving after an ever more perfect model of being, perfect knowing and being is ultimately unattainable. Caught in this double-bind we exemplify a type of inevitable, unceasing movement in accordance with an unchanging reality, or to draw on Lewis Carroll, running as fast as we can, we stay where we are. As we are able to have a sort of intuitive grasp of our condition — though the implication from Parmenides’ poem is that such intuition may depend as much upon grace as our own endeavors — the highest truth attainable is hence a sort of learned ignorance, a binding of being with becoming, aletheia with doxa, and one with many. Parmenides closes his poem with a call to not forget the things of the immortal realm as we return to our everyday lives: “But look at things which, though far off, are securely present to the
mind; for you will not cut off for yourself what is from holding to what is, neither scattering in
every way in order nor drawing together” (313).

Though not considered to be a historical account, Plato’s *Parmenides* engages with many
of the same questions that drove Parmenides. In this dialogue between a young Socrates and
Parmenides, participation is discussed as a way of understanding the relations between one and
many and being and becoming. The dialogue begins with Socrates initiating a discussion of how
forms can be both one and many, it being already clear how particulars may admit contradiction
or multiple forms. In what follows Parmenides endeavors to show him the fallacy of conceiving
of the relation between one and many, and forms and particulars, in physical terms: imagining
the one to be in a particular, whether the one is understood to be present as a whole or as a part,
leads to absurdities (131a ff.).

Seeing that the relation is not one of whole or part, Socrates
suggests that their relation may be one of difference and postulates a division between the two
realms such that no knowledge or influence is possible between them. This too is dismissed for
its absurdities (133b ff.). The opposite scenario, which would posit no difference between forms
and particulars, thereby effectively eliminating forms as such, is likewise rejected. As
Parmenides explains, knowledge and communication are not possible without recourse to forms:

‘If someone, having an eye on all the difficulties we have just brought up and others of
the same sort, won’t allow that there are forms for things and won’t mark off a form for
each one, he won’t have anywhere to turn his thought, since he doesn’t allow that for each
ting thing there is a character that is always the same. In this he will destroy the power of
dialectic.’ (135c)

In this argument forms play much the same role as names in Parmenides’ poem: in distinguishing
a thing they say what it is like and unlike and make discussion of the thing possible, thereby
enabling knowledge of the thing.

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4 Citations from *Parmenides* refer to section numbers in *Parmenides*, Trans. Mary Louise Gill and Paul
The second half of the *Parmenides* consists of a dialogue between Parmenides and a young character named Aristotle in which Parmenides demonstrates the proper method of philosophical questioning, namely to consider the consequences for each thing and its others both if it is and if it is not. The item under consideration is the one, and the series of questions regarding the nature of the one and its consequences work to expand upon the issue of how to understand participation raised in the first half of the dialogue. Hypothesis 1 begins, “If it is one, the one would not be many, would it?” (137c). Working strictly from the hypothesis that the one is in fact one, thereby precluding difference or multiplicity, each quality that may be attributed to the one is shown to be untenable, so that the one is neither at rest nor in motion, neither a whole nor composed of parts, neither straight nor curved, neither the same nor different from itself or any other thing, and so on. Finally the one is shown to neither come to be, be or perish, so that the one can neither be said to be, nor to be one (141e ff.). The problem is that if the one cannot be said to be, then nothing can be said to perceive, name or know it, for all accounts rest upon the assertion that the one is something. Consequently we cannot properly say that the one is one, and all positive knowledge of it is impossible. The *Parmenides* of Plato’s dialogue has reached the same trouble as the historical Parmenides did in his poem: to give an account of the one the one must be contracted into being and difference introduced. The goddess herself is not able describe a single, uniform reality, and must discuss non-being even as she describes being, for being and knowledge necessarily include multiplicity.

Hypothesis 2 hence begins from the standpoint that the one participates in being. As in Parmenides’ poem, being bestows both existence and determinacy: because the one is, it is now able to be anything. However, as the one both becomes, is and perishes, it can be shown to be both at rest and moving, both same and different to itself and all other things, both a whole and composed of parts and so on, so that while the one can be known, to the extent that everything
may be known and said about it, nothing is truly known about it, except perhaps that it permits all things. An interesting passage from the second hypothesis sheds light on how to solve the dilemma of saying and knowing nothing about the one and saying and knowing everything about the one. Parmenides says, “Everything is surely related to everything as follows: either it is the same or different; or, if it is not the same or different, it would be related as part to whole or as whole to part” (146b). We have encountered these relations in the first half of the dialogue and already concluded that they inadequately describe the relation between one and many or forms and particulars, so we know Parmenides is forcing absurdities upon us to reinforce the error in accepting this statement. Participation is precisely a relationship that does not operate according to the logic of whole, part, same or different, because it is an ontological, rather than a physical relation. If the one is taken as being on the same ontological register as being then all things may be seen to belong to the one and all things may be said regarding the one. Yet to understand the one as being related to being as whole, part, same or different — the relations that occur between members of the same ontological plane — removes the very quality of oneness that defines the one. Likewise, if the one is denied any involvement in being, nothing may be known or said of it or of anything, and dialectic is destroyed. The one must be understood as both transcendent and immanent, and the notion of participation is what allows us to conceive of such a relationship, so that the *Parmenides* may then be thought of as Plato’s defense of participation. Participation gives us a framework in which grasp how the one both is and is not in being, and how beings both partake and do not partake of the one.

The *Republic* presents similar insights, with the Good taking the place of the one that is above being. As Socrates explains to Glaucon, the Good does not have being, beauty, truth or knowledge even as it bestows such things:
‘I suppose you’ll say the sun not only provides what is seen with the power of being seen, but also with generation, growth, and nourishment although it itself isn’t generation.’
‘Of course.’
‘Therefore, say that not only being known is present in the things known as a consequence of the Good, but also existence and being are in them as a result of it, although the Good isn’t being but is still beyond being, exceeding it in dignity and power.’ (508e ff.)

Socrates’ description of how being is in things because of the Good while the Good itself exceeds being describes the relationship of participation that was alluded to in the *Parmenides*, where the one/Good is transcendent to all being yet immanent to the extent that all things participate in it. As such it cannot itself be properly known, though it can be intuited through the things that participate in it.

As that which sustains being, the Good is the efficient cause of being. It is also the final cause, for all things are for the purpose of the Good. Socrates describes the awakening of knowledge as the kindling of desire for the Good, where beings turn from the distracting images of becoming to the image of what is. As the Good is the final cause of being, so that all things necessarily desire to participate more fully in the Good, the capacity for this turn is innate:

‘The present argument . . . indicates that this power is in the soul of each, and that the instrument with which each learns — just as an eye is not able to turn toward the light from the dark without the whole body — must be turned around from that which is *coming into being* together with the whole soul until it is able to endure looking at that which *is* and the brightest part of that which *is*. And we affirm that this is the Good, don’t we?’ (518b ff.)

Turning from becoming to being marks the awareness of our purpose: to become toward being, that is to say, to participate more fully in that in which we already participate. In this sense progress toward the Good marks a return to and affirmation of our selves. Yet having the Good as our highest aim means that our movement is unending, for in its transcendence the Good is

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unattainable. Consequently, though we strive for being, we do so in unending becoming. If we were to cease becoming because we somehow were perfectly participating in the Good, then our very essence as that which is sustained by and desirous of the Good would cease to be. Our being necessitates our becoming, so that turning from becoming to being really marks an affirmation of ourselves as unending, erotically motivated, becoming toward being. Hence each stage of our being and knowing is provisional. What it is that sustains us and which we desire is knowable only through its effects, so that the Good is apprehendable only to the extent that we desire it and are sustained by it. Turning back to *Parmenides*, we see that the conclusions of the first hypothesis acknowledge that the one can not be conceived of other than through being, while the conclusions of the second hypothesis acknowledge that the one can not be known for what it is if it is simply identified with being. The suggestion that there is a perfectly realized one beyond multiplicity and the inability to describe such a one without introducing opposition in Parmenides’ poem also speaks to the difficulty in describing the relationship of participation that occurs between one and many and being and becoming. Interestingly, Plato links the correct understanding of this relationship to the achievement of justice in the *Republic*, just as Parmenides did in his poem.

Parmenides also acknowledged his desire for being in the opening lines of his poem, and Plato elaborates more fully on this theme and the impossibility of full knowledge in the *Phaedrus*. While refuting the claim that lover is to be avoided because of his madness, Socrates asserts that “the greatest goods come to us through the madness that is given as a divine gift” (244a), and proceeds to demonstrate that love of wisdom is divinely inspired madness.⁶ Divine souls, he explains, revolve around the “being that really is, which is intangible and without color or shape. It is perceived only by the intellect, the pilot of the soul, and is the object of the true

kind of knowledge” (247c). Mortal souls attempt to keep up with the gods and catch a glimpse of this being, but “despite much effort, all these finish the journey without being initiated into the vision of what is, and afterwards they feed on mere opinion” (248b). Embodied, incarnated souls are those which have lost their wings and are struggling to return to the divine revolution. Love emerges as that which enables wing-growth: in love we see the image of our god shining through our beloved, and in desiring and affirming our beloved we ourselves are affirmed. The being that really is functions much the same as the Good in the Republic: it is intangible and without quality, yet it may be perceived in the things it enables. Hence Socrates explains that while the mortal things we value do not lead to wisdom, they do allow the true object of knowledge to be dimly perceived:

There is no enlightenment in this world’s images of justice, judiciousness, and all the other things souls value. However, as they approach these resemblances with their feeble organs, a few do with difficulty see the original through the resemblance, although earlier, when we were following Zeus while others followed another of the gods, there was a brilliantly shining beauty to see. (250b)

Recollecting in this manner, we draw closer to the being that really is and our wings begin to sprout. Loving and the recollection it enables begins a circular process of movement, whereby the closer we are drawn to our beloved and to the true being, the more they affirm and sustain our desire for them.

The notion of recollection is hence linked to the notion of participation: in recollection we recall what we already know and in participation we become what we already are. In each case we are moving toward being. What develops as we progress is the amplification of our movement toward being, for we desire more and more and move faster and faster with each revolution. Socrates calls this desirous movement a type of possession or divine madness (249c), an appropriate description of our relationship to our cause, for it is the one/Good that possesses
us rather than the other way around. Socrates’ explanation of immortality in this dialogue is interesting here, for it rests on the unending movement of the soul: “Every soul is immortal, for that which is always changing is immortal… Only what changes itself, since it needs nothing beyond itself, never stops changing” (245c). The descriptions of love as fueling the motions of the soul that follow nuance this account of self-change. It is another which motivates us — the being that truly is that shines through our beloved — yet to the extent that this being is our own cause and we participate in it, we are self-moving. Indeed, we are moving more into ourselves as we desire and participate more fully. As in Parmenides’ poem the full vision of truth is unattainable to mortals, yet though the concepts, categories and contraries we value in the mortal realm do not give wisdom they do enable an intuition of true being. When the pursuit of truth is seen as erotically motivated the double-bind of our existence becomes less a tragedy than a love story, in which the very inability to fully assimilate the object of one’s affections promises unending love.

There is a spirit within the Platonic dialogues that is similar to the spirit Reiner Schürmann locates in Parmenides’ poem: while the notion of the one is central to both thinkers, they both recognize the impossibility of fully knowing the one. Each takes mortal knowledge to be enabled by difference and determination, and recognize that temporary privileging is only provisional. The provisional nature of our knowledge is an unavoidable fact of our constitution as mixed beings, nonetheless, once we understand this and have acquired learned ignorance, as it were, we may more closely act in accord with Justice. Moreover, learned ignorance leads to an understanding of the relationship between one and many and being and becoming as that of participation, an understanding that while provisional, proves more satisfying than alternative speculations. In this way we are able to have an intuitive understanding of what is in principle unknowable. It belongs to our nature to be in constant becoming even as we desire to participate
more and more fully in being, and while Schürmann finds this tragic, our unending movement may also be seen as an unending, and hence self-sustaining, love-affair.