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The Call of Parmenides

I devote this chapter to advancing and defending an interpretation of Parmenides as rejecting any and all distinctions. There are for Parmenides, as I will argue, no divisions in the world, no multiplicity. I will call this position strict monism and will contrast it with other, less strict, more "generous" forms of monism that are often attributed to Parmenides, especially in some prominent recent secondary literature. By uncovering the source within Parmenides of this strict monism, we will be in a position to see how he makes what I called in the proem the Parmenidean Ascent, an explanation-driven rejection of distinctions in general. It is the exploration of and engagement with the reasons for the Parmenidean Ascent as it appears in various domains in philosophy that will constitute the theme of this book. As we will see, the philosophical controversies at work in interpreting Parmenides have been replicated and transformed in many different areas throughout historical and recent and contemporary philosophy

I should stress at the outset that, although in keeping with traditional usage I speak of monism with its suggestion of one-ness, I am not wedded to this term. Although Parmenides does at one point (B 8.6) speak of what-is or being as one (*ἕν*), it is far from clear whether what-is is one in the same sense that later philosophers have in mind when they express the view that being is one or that there is one thing. When I attribute a strict monism to Parmenides, all I have in mind is the view that there are no distinctions to be found in reality, no multiplicity. I am not necessarily attributing to Parmenides such views as, e.g., that the things in the world can be counted and that the count is one.

I should also stress that in exploring this monistic, no-multiplicity strand in Parmenides' thought, I am, as will soon be obvious, largely leaving to the side many other important interpretive issues, including especially the issue of the relation between thought and reality in Parmenides. Also, I will not discuss in any detail Parmenides' engagement with cosmology. Thus, I am by no means offering a comprehensive interpretation of Parmenides. Rather, my

inquiry in this chapter is targeted upon the kind of monism that Parmenides may or may not espouse.

Let me give the bare bones of a strict monist reading before exploring some textual objections to this reading and some related philosophical objections to strict monism itself, and before going on to engage with some powerful alternative interpretations.

Parmenides frames his poem around the question of what are and are not legitimate paths of inquiry ("ὁδοὶ . . . διζήσιός") (B 2.2; see also B 6.3). The first path he considers concerns what-is and what cannot not be ("ἡ μέν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι" B 2.3). Parmenides contrasts this path with the way of non-being according to which it is not and it must not be ("ἡ δ' ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς χρεών ἐστι μὴ εἶναι" B 2.5). For Parmenides, the former path is the "path of persuasion [πειθοῦς . . . κέλευθος]" (B 2.4), and the latter path is a path "wholly without report for you can neither know what is not—for that cannot be accomplished (ἀνυστόν)[1]—nor tell of it" (B 2.6–8). The goddess urges Parmenides to "keep your thought from this way of inquiry [σὺ τῆσδ' ἀφ' ὁδοῦ διζήσιος εἶργε νόημα]" (B 7.2). As the goddess emphasizes, non-being is not (B 6.2).

There has been much controversy over whether Parmenides discusses, in addition, a third way of inquiry "on which mortals with no understanding stray two-headed" (B 6.4–5), the path of those "who believe that to be and not to be are the same and not the same" (B 6.8–9). It is unclear whether this is a separate path or whether it is to be incorporated into one of the other two. We do not need to resolve this matter here.[2] For our purposes, the key point is that the way of being is legitimate and that the way of non-being is not: the invidious treatment of these two ways is enough to enable me to articulate the strict monist reading. On this reading, in rejecting the way of non-being or what-is-not, Parmenides rejects distinctions in general and thus denies the existence of any multiplicity, of any things that are distinct from one another. There are, for Parmenides, on this reading, no true negations, no true negative claims, for to conduct an inquiry via the claim that *x* is not *y* is to inquire into what is not. And this type of inquiry Parmenides disallows.

[1] Mourelatos has "cannot be consummated" for reasons that we will see later. This is also a possible translation.

[2] For the record, I favor Nehamas' textual suggestions which support an interpretation according to which there is no such third path distinct from the second, the way of non-being (Nehamas, "On Parmenides' Three Ways of Inquiry"). I differ, though, as we will see from Nehamas, when it comes to the issue of strict monism.

This view is extreme and, perhaps, even paradoxical. To see just how extreme it is, consider this strict monist view in relation to two, by comparison, remarkably tame and mild claims which have recently been portrayed as monistic. Thus, we have the views in contemporary metaphysics known as priority monism and existence monism. Jonathan Schaffer articulates very well the distinction between these views in an important series of papers.[3] According to priority monism, the only fundamental concrete thing—the only concrete thing not explained by other things—is the cosmos itself. Depending on this one fundamental thing is (or may be) a multiplicity of other things, things distinct from the cosmos itself. These dependent things may be parts of or aspects of or modes of the cosmos. This view is monistic because there is only one fundamental (concrete) thing, but it is a *priority* monism because within the one fundamental thing are many parts or aspects or modes to which the cosmos is metaphysically prior.

By contrast, existence monism denies this multiplicity of concrete parts or aspects or modes of the cosmos. For the existence monist, the cosmos itself is the only concrete thing that exists, and there are no distinctions or multiplicity in or within this one concrete object.[4]

Priority monism and existence monism are both controversial, but Parmenides' strict monism is even more extreme in at least two respects. First, both existence monism and priority monism allow for a multiplicity of fundamental, non-concrete objects—e.g., a multiplicity of abstract objects such as, perhaps, abstract universals. Parmenides' strict monism, by contrast, does not invoke or allow any abstract/concrete distinction. There is, for Parmenides, simply what-is, simply being. The rejection of any distinctions in Parmenides' view is more complete than in priority or even existence monism.

Second, both priority monism and existence monism insist that things or the thing can be numbered and that the number of fundamental things is one. By contrast, as I noted, Parmenides is not clearly committed to there being precisely one thing. His view is simply that there are no distinctions within being.

Despite its simplicity and elegance, the strict monist interpretation of Parmenides faces many challenges. First and perhaps most obviously, there

[3] For example, Schaffer, "Monism: The Priority of the Whole" and "Monism." The distinction between existence monism and priority monism will prove useful again in chapters 3, 8, and 10.

[4] Horgan and Portç embrace existence monism in their book, *Austere Realism*. Schaffer embraces priority monism.

is the question of how the attribution of a strict monism to Parmenides is compatible with his extensive interest in cosmology. The second part of Parmenides's poem—"Doxa" or "Opinion"—presents various cosmological claims. Parmenides (or the goddess) offers these as "human beliefs" ("δόξας . . . βροτείας" B 8.51) and characterizes the verses in which this presentation occurs as "deceptive" ("ἀπατηλόν" B 8.52). Perhaps more positively, he or the goddess also calls these cosmological views "likely" or "plausible" ("ἐοικότα" B 8.60), though this term also conveys the less positive suggestion of being merely apparent or seeming.[5] These opinions are structured around a duality of light and night (φάος and νύξ B 9.1). Given this duality, i.e. given this distinction, it follows that, for a strict monist position which brooks no distinctions, these views are false. But then the obvious challenge to the strict monist reading arises: why does Parmenides spend so much time presenting views that he must regard as false or not true? John Palmer presses this point well, "why should he have bothered to present a fundamentally flawed or 'near-correct' cosmology, founded upon principles that fail to satisfy the very requirements he himself has supposedly specified?"[6]

While supporters of a strict monist reading may find it difficult to explain why Parmenides includes these cosmological passages in the poem,[7] there is much that a strict monist interpreter can do to allay this worry. G. E. L. Owen, e.g., argues that the purpose of the Doxa is "wholly dialectical":

> Parmenides sets himself to give the correct or the most plausible analysis of those presuppositions on which ordinary men, and not just theorists, seem to build their picture of the world . . . .Whittled down to their simplest and most economical they can be seen still to require the existence of at least two irreducibly different things in a constant process of interaction; and both the plurality and the process have now, on Parmenides' view, been proven absurd. (Owen, "Eleatic Questions," p. 89)

More recently, Sattler nicely develops a similar point, "the cosmology is most fitting as it is as similar as possible to the truth, which is based on one

[5] See Mourelatos, *Route*, p. 231.

[6] Palmer, "Parmenides," see also Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy*, p. 31. Tor also pursues this question in detail in *Mortal and Divine in Early Greek Epistemology*, chapter 4.

[7] See Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 262; Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* vol. 2, pp. 5–6, 52–53.

principle, Being."[8] Andrew Gregory endorses a fairly strict monistic reading while pursuing the interesting suggestion that the two parts of Parmenides' poem are united by Parmenides' overarching interest in the notion of sufficient reason.[9] In general, I think that, while the presence of the cosmology in the poem does put some pressure on the strict monist reading, the issue of the role of the cosmology need not be the make-or-break issue that some may seem to regard it as being.

A potentially more damning challenge comes from the apparently paradoxical nature of the strict monist reading: espousing the strict monist position is often thought to be self-undermining or otherwise incoherent. To argue for—or even just to state—the position that there are no distinctions and no true negations requires the use of distinctions such as the distinction between premise and conclusion in an argument, and requires the distinction between the various parts—the contained concepts or subject and predicate—of any premise. Also, the claim that there are no distinctions requires the use of negation, e.g. in denying that what-is-not exists. As Owen puts the point, "Parmenides can only prove the unintelligibility of *οὐκ ἔστιν* by himself denying the existence of certain states of affairs."[10] Mourelatos gives expression to a similar worry when he describes a strict monist position and then goes on to say:

> The elaborate structure of B8, the length of the poem, the double account, the epic form, the proem, the imagery—all these become otiose if Parmenides' intention was merely to call our attention to the fact that only (genuinely) positive propositions are possible, and that the universe must have the simplicity of a (genuinely) positive proposition. That, of course, is a *reductio ad absurdum* of philosophy even before Gorgias. Had Parmenides been understood by his contemporaries along the lines of [this] interpretation, philosophy should have moved straight into the paradox-mongering of the Megarians. (Mourelatos, *The Route of Parmenides,* p. 54).

I agree that Parmenides can be seen, on the strict monist view, as employing distinctions and negations in the course of arguing that there are no distinctions or negations, and I agree that his view can thus

[8] Sattler, *The Concept of Motion in Ancient Greek Thought*, chapter 2. See also Sedley, "Parmenides and Melissus," and Long, "The Principles of Parmenides' Cosmogony."
[9] Gregory, "Parmenides, Cosmology and Sufficient Reason."
[10] Owen, "Eleatic Questions," p. 100. See also Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, vol. 1, p. 177.

seem self-undermining. But, I would also argue, this appearance of self-undermining is a feature and not a bug. After all, as strict monist interpreters might say again, Parmenides can be seen as proceeding dialectically. That is, Parmenides can be seen as engaging with an opponent who embraces the way of what-is-not, the way of non-being or negations, that Parmenides seeks to reject. Parmenides invokes distinctions in order to show that this opponent's reliance on distinctions leads to incoherence. Parmenides is using his opponent's own tools—distinctions—against his opponent. Montgomery Furth stresses this aspect of Parmenides's approach, and he notes that Parmenides himself uses the term "ἔλεγχος" in B 7.5 (a word that can mean test or refutation) to describe his approach (Furth, "Elements of Eleatic Ontology," p. 118). In using notions to which—by his own lights—he is not entitled, Parmenides' progress is, as I noted in the proem of this book, in some way like Wittgenstein's in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In that work, one of Wittgenstein's goals is to show that certain apparent statements are nonsensical, devoid of meaning. To reach this result, Wittgenstein makes certain claims that he sees or comes to see as, by his own standards, nonsensical. These nonsensical claims are, as he puts it, a ladder that he must climb and then throw away. In much the same way, Parmenides draws upon distinctions in the course of arguing for the conclusion that there are no distinctions. In a passage part of which I just quoted, Owen—a defender of the strict monist interpretation—invokes this parallel to Wittgenstein, and he also points out that the great skeptic Sextus Empiricus similarly uses the ladder-discarding image:

> Just as Parmenides can only prove the unintelligibility of οὐκ ἔστιν by himself denying the existence of certain states of affairs, so he can only show the vacuousness of temporal and spatial distinctions by a proof which employs them. His argument, to adopt an analogy from Sextus and Wittgenstein, is a ladder which must be thrown away when one has climbed it. (p. 100)[11]

[11] The allusion to Sextus is presumably to *Against the Logicians* 8:481 (p. 183 in Bett's edition of *Against the Logicians*). Sextus speaks there of overturning the ladder with one's foot, not of throwing away the ladder as Wittgenstein does. See also Owen, "Plato and Parmenides on the Timeless Present," pp. 321–22. Wedin, *Parmenides' Grand Deduction*, pp. 48–53, offers a non-dialectical approach to the worry about self-defeat. This strategy turns on a distinction between first- and second-order states of affairs and also on a distinction between propositions about first-order states of affairs and propositions about second-order states of affairs. However, these distinctions may seem foreign to Parmenides, and indeed they would have to be foreign to Parmenides if he is to be interpreted as a strict monist. Wedin briefly tries to address this kind of worry on p. 53n74. Wedin (pp. 192–96) directly criticizes Owen's appeal on Parmenides' behalf to Wittgenstein's ladder. This criticism may

Of course, drawing this parallel to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and his ladder-throwing display may go only so far in allaying the worry about the incoherence of the strict monist position that I am attributing to Parmenides. After all, Wittgenstein's move here itself may not be coherent. Agreed, but my not entirely glib reply is: if Wittgenstein can do it, why can't Parmenides? The point is that even if (or perhaps because) Wittgenstein's position threatens to be unstable, this position is of great interest and significance. Parmenides' system enjoys, I am claiming, the same kind of interest and significance. I'm not advancing a particular interpretation of Wittgenstein here, nor am I claiming that there is an exact parallel between Parmenides and Wittgenstein. My point is that there may be in Parmenides a willingness to embrace a self-consciously self-undermining argument in something like the way that Wittgenstein sees his own arguments as somehow self-undermining.

The type of dialectic that Parmenides employs will be at work throughout this book: a certain claim or notion espoused by my opponents in a given philosophical domain is or will be used against these opponents. The result in each case is a new and wild and perhaps paradoxical rejection of all distinctions and negations in this domain. Such paradoxicality will be displayed in all its glory (infamy) in chapter 9. And when you see me—as you will indeed see me—making such ladder-throwing, perhaps paradoxical, moves, my again not entirely glib refrain will be: if Wittgenstein and Parmenides can do it, why can't I?

Let's continue with the challenges to the strict monistic reading of Parmenides. Apart from worries about paradox—worries that can, as I just argued, be addressed, if not fully allayed—a powerful objection to this interpretation comes from the venerable principle of charity. One version of this principle specifies that interpreters should not, without compelling reason, attribute implausible or outlandish views to philosophers. Because strict monism is a highly implausible view that, as Palmer puts it, "no serious metaphysician should want to adopt,"[12] the principle of charity dictates that we should not saddle Parmenides with such a position unless a strong argument for strict monism can be found and unless Parmenides can plausibly be seen as sensitive to such an

turn too heavily on a controversial reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* as non-paradoxical in a way that Owen's reading and my reading do not.

[12] Palmer, "Parmenides" and *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy*, p. 38.

argument.[13] This injunction should be in place especially if there is a less outlandish view that can be attributed to Parmenides instead.

I should say that I'm no fan of the version of the principle of charity invoked here by Palmer and invoked by so many others. This is in part for the reason that I do not regard the implausibility of a philosophical view as a reason for rejecting that view. Chapter 11 will be devoted to the reasons that I stopped worrying about—and learned not to be afraid of—implausibility. In the meantime, let's play along now with this appeal to the principle of charity and let's see where it goes.

Fortunately, from the point of view the principle of charity and of those hostile to—or skeptical of—the strict monist reading, less radical alternative interpretations are available. According to most, if not all, such interpretations, Parmenides rejects not negations or differentiation in general, but rather only a certain kind of negation and differentiation. To articulate more fully and to respond to this complex, further challenge to a strict monist interpretation, I will now offer an outline of this kind of alternative reading and highlight the powerful philosophical and textual grounds that support it. In the process of presenting the best reasons behind this alternative interpretation, I will be laying the groundwork for an articulation of the, perhaps more powerful, philosophical reasons for attributing the strict version of monism to Parmenides. It is by seeing why the more moderate alternative interpretation is or would be, in Parmenides' eyes, ultimately incoherent that we will be able to appreciate the best reasons for attributing the strict monist position to Parmenides.

What, then, is the moderate alternative to a strict monist interpretation? Actually, there are many readings of Parmenides that do not attribute a strict monism to him. I will focus on one of the most clearly articulated and compelling versions of a non-strict monist interpretation: the one offered by Mourelatos in his book *The Route of Parmenides* and in other works. I will, however, also mention several other related non-strict monist accounts. There are important differences among these versions of a non-strict monist reading, but none that materially affects the presentation of the general,

[13] In *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy*, Palmer describes the strict monist position as "wildly counter-intuitive" (p. 25) and as "extremely counter-intuitive" (p. 189n2). Palmer regards Melissus as holding the strict monist view but deems "Parmenides' monism [to be] something altogether different from the strict monism of the aping Melissus" (p. 223) and urges us to "distinguish the more philosophically serious views of Parmenides from the crude paradoxes of Melissus" (p. 47).

non-strict monist interpretation that I am about to offer or the case against such an interpretation that I will eventually make.

Mourelatos' alternative to a strict monist reading turns on his construal of what Parmenides means when he says that a thing, *x,* is *y* (for some feature or thing, *y*) in a certain distinctive sense of "is." Mourelatos thus addresses the question of what a certain kind of predication amounts to for Parmenides. As Mourelatos puts it, Parmenidean predication is

> a complete exposure of, and insight into, the identity of a thing to such an extent and in such a manner that no further questions with respect to that thing need or may arise. To put it roughly: on the side of the predicate, the subject fully explains itself, and in terms of itself. Predication so understood is at once analysis, explication, and explanation. And it promises to be all these finally and completely. (Mourelatos, *The Route of Parmenides*, p. 57; unless otherwise noted all subsequent references to Mourelatos in this chapter will be to this work)

For Mourelatos, such a full explanatory predication can be expressed as "*x* is really *y*" or "*x* is truly or ultimately *y*."

> To say . . . that *x* is *y* implies that *x* is really *y*, or that the reality of *x* is *y*, or that *x* in its reality is *y*, and so on. (p. 58)

Mourelatos calls such predication "speculative predication," and he also suggests that another way of characterizing this kind of predication is as "explanative predication" (p. 59). He worries, though, that this latter term "suggests rather too strongly and directly a 'Why?' question, whereas the relevant question is of the form, 'What is it?' " (p. 59). However, we will see shortly that Mourelatos' own analysis of Parmenides' argumentation quite naturally highlights the centrality of explanation to Parmenides' line of thought and also highlights Parmenides' engagement with why-questions. Mourelatos goes on to show how the notion of such speculative predication is at work in other thinkers around Parmenides' time such as Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Anaximenes, Anaximander, and Thales (pp. 60–61).[14]

[14] Other commentators also appeal to notions like that of Mourelatos' speculative predication, e.g., Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides*, pp. 39–42, 66; Rapp, "Zeno and the Eleatic Anti-Pluralism," pp. 72–73; and Nehamas, "On Parmenides' Three Ways of Inquiry," pp. 106–7; and "Parmenidean Being/Heraclitean Fire," p. 50.

I have nothing but admiration for the way in which Mourelatos and other scholars establish that Parmenides' notion of "is" is a notion of something like speculative predication. What I do want to challenge, however, is the way in which this notion has been used against a strict monist reading of Parmenides and has been used in the service of what has been called a "generous" monist reading.

We can see how speculative predication is put to this non-strict monist use by looking at how speculative predication interacts with negation or negative statements. In the spirit of Parmenidean speculative predication, to say that *x* is not F, for some feature F, is to say that *x* is really not F, is ultimately not F. And when Parmenides rejects the way of non-being, rejects the way of what-is-not, what he rejects is not negation in general, but rather what Mourelatos calls constitutive negation—a negation that purports to specify what *x* really is, purports to expose the identity of *x*. In rejecting the path of what-is-not, Parmenides thus eliminates not distinctions in general but rather only distinctions that are purportedly built into the nature of a thing, that fundamentally characterize what a thing is. Mourelatos puts the point this way:

> it is not the word "not," or negative predication in general, which is being rejected, but the view that an unqualified, unrestricted proposition of the form "is really not-F" can ever feature as the last statement (or one of the last) in cosmological inquiry. What is being rejected is constitutive negation; negation which is *in* the world as part of its structure. (pp. 79–80; emphasis in the original)

Mourelatos also says that Parmenides' argument "does not involve a wholesale rejection of negation as such" (p. 90), and he says that "the rejection of the negative route is not a rejection of negative predication in general" (p. 75). Mourelatos later calls the non-constitutive negation that survives Parmenides' attack on the way of what-is-not "supervenient negation."[15] Curd draws a similar distinction between what she calls internal negation and external negation (*The Legacy of Parmenides*, pp. xxi–xxiii, 94–97): internal negation (like constitutive negation) is ruled out, but external negation (like supervenient negation) is not.

[15] Mourelatos, pp. 355, 358—originally published in "Some Alternatives in Interpreting Parmenides."

In allowing non-constitutive negation, Mourelatos paves the way for an alternative to a strict monist reading of Parmenides. The fact that constitutive negation is ruled out means that any genuine thing is unified or simple and has no distinctions within it. The fact, as Mourelatos would have it, that non-constitutive negation is allowed, however, means that there can be a multiplicity of such unified, simple things. The resulting view is monist in the sense that each genuine thing is a unified, simple being with no internal negation. But this version of monism is generous (and not strict) because it allows for a multiplicity of such monistic beings.

This is an appealing interpretation, not least because it attempts to capture much of the reasoning behind a strict monist interpretation, but also because it at the same time seeks to avoid the most outlandish results of that interpretation. As we will see, many of the arguments advanced by strict monist interpreters can be advanced as well by generous monist interpreters, and, as Mourelatos emphasizes, his interpretation "seeks to preserve as many of the attractive features of [a strict monist interpretation] as possible" (p. 356). However, the position of the "generous" monist fails on its own terms, as I will now argue.

The key difference between the non-strict monist and the strict monist, viz. whether Parmenides rejects negation in general or only constitutive negation, is also the point at which the generous monist interpretation is at its weakest. And this is because, as I will now argue, the non-strict monist fails to see that and how the reasons Mourelatos and others rightly give for rejecting constitutive negation in Parmenides are at once reasons for rejecting negations in Parmenides in general. Thus, as I will argue, the distinction between kinds of negation that is essential to the generous monist interpretation is undermined.

To see how this challenge to a generous monist interpretation arises, let's consider carefully the reasons non-strict monist interpreters offer for rejecting constitutive negation, for denying that what a thing really is can contain some negations or distinctions. Here again I focus on the reasons offered by Mourelatos.

What then, according to Mourelatos, is wrong with constitutive negation? As I mentioned earlier, Parmenides engages in a search or quest or inquiry. Mourelatos considers what Parmenides regards as illegitimate about an inquiry into what-is-not, and he contends that Parmenides rejects such a search because it "cannot be successfully completed; and it cannot even get started" (p. 75). Mourelatos cites in this connection B 2.7: "This is a path from which

no tidings ever come. For you could neither come to know the thing itself which is not, for it cannot be consummated (*οὐ γαρ ἀνυστόν*) nor could you point it out." Here I use Mourelatos' translation of "*ἀνυστόν*" as "consummated" (p. 333). As I mentioned, this term can also mean "accomplished."

But why can't there be any consummation of the search or of the object of the search? Ultimately, for Mourelatos, it's a matter of vagueness—literally, of wandering aimlessly:

> The incompleteness of what-is-not is the incompleteness, for example, of "the so-and-so which is really not-bright," or alternately "the real not-brightness of so-and-so." If "the bright" is something, then "the not-bright" is not a second thing parallel and equal in rank to it, but something wholly indeterminate and vague: anything and everything outside it. So, if we consider a journey to "what is really not-F" . . . , clearly this is a journey that could never be brought to completion. For we have no criterion for recognizing the goal . . . if we should chance to come upon it. (p. 76; see also p. 80)

As Mourelatos also puts the point:

> if we apply the negative particle to an expression that does no more than single out a thing, the resulting negative expression will be utterly vague. It would simply point away from a thing and toward that inexhaustible and uncharted space that lies outside the thing. (p. 327)

See also:

> . . . the goddess' express objection to negative statements is not that they fail to refer, but rather that they are uninformative, specifically because they are evasive, vague, and open-ended. (p. 338)

Mourelatos ties Parmenides' emphasis on vagueness or incompleteness to the Homeric motif of wandering or journeying (pp. 17–25). Perhaps more relevantly for our purposes he also ties Parmenides' concern to avoid the wandering incompleteness of the way of negation to the Principle of Sufficient Reason, the PSR: after pointing out correctly that Parmenides' argument against the generation of being turns on "what later came to be known as the principle of sufficient reason," he notes that "[w]e have here still another clue that predication carried for him the force of final and complete

explanation" (p. 100). One way to see the connection to the PSR is this: for us to follow the way of non-being and to have a determinate negative thought, we would have to end our wandering by settling on a determinate object of thought. But we could only do so arbitrarily or brutely. Given the PSR's rejection of brute facts, our wandering would thus never come to an end, and we would thus not succeed in having a determinate negative thought. By contrast, the positive way of being does not suffer from such arbitrariness: there is no worry here about wandering and struggling to settle on a particular object of thought. Rather, with the way of being there is no attempt to move from what is not to what is (or what is to what is not). Without negation, there is no movement away, no wandering, no threat of arbitrariness, or of the violations of the PSR that afflict the way of non-being.

PSR argument

To bolster this reading of the PSR-based rejection of the way of non-being, I would like to explore the role of the PSR throughout Parmenides's poem, particularly in the crucial fragment 8. Thus, what follows are a number of ways in which the PSR can be seen to be at work in this fragment. Many of these appearances of the PSR have been noted and stressed by other commentators, including by non-strict monist interpreters; some of these appearances are, as far as I know, newly noted here. All of them indicate the deeply rationalist character of Parmenides' thought, a character that is or can be recognized by both strict monist interpreters and by generous monist interpreters. I invoke these passages in which the PSR is at work, not only to show what may motivate Parmenides' rejection of the way of non-being, but also to lay the groundwork for the ultimate, PSR-driven rejection of a non-strict monist reading of Parmenides.

(1) Consider B 8.5–6: "it never was nor will be, since it is now all together, one, indivisible. For what parentage will you seek for it? [οὐδέ ποτ᾽ ἦν οὐδ᾽ ἔσται, ἐπεὶ νῦν ἐστιν ὁμοῦ πᾶν, ἕν, συνεχές. τίνα γὰρ γένναν διζήσεαι αὐτοῦ]."

What-is or being (*ἐόν*) never was or will be because (*γὰρ*) there can be no origin of what-is or being, no coming into being of *ἐόν*. With his rhetorical question, Parmenides seems to be reasoning in the following way: because there can be nothing that explains the coming into being of being itself, it follows that there is no such coming into being of being itself. Such coming into being would be a brute fact, and so there is no such coming into being.[16]

[16] Sattler, *The Concept of Motion in Ancient Greek Thought*, p. 14, also sees the PSR at work in the rhetorical question "what origin will you seek for it?"

(2) Immediately thereafter in B 8.7–10, Parmenides continues the theme of the alleged origination of what-is:

> How and whence grown? I shall not let you say or conceive, "from Not-being," for it cannot be said or conceived that anything is not; and then what necessity in fact could have urged it to begin and spring up later or before from Nothing? Thus it must either be entirely or not be at all. (B 8.7–10)

Here Parmenides seems to be arguing that if being comes to be, it would have to come to be at a specific time (now or later). But there could be no need or requirement (no χρέος) for its beginning at one time rather than another. So Parmenides concludes that there is no coming into being of what-is. This is the passage most frequently regarded as containing some kind of commitment on Parmenides' part to the PSR.[17]

(3) Parmenides' famous analogy of the well-rounded sphere in B 8.42–49 also expresses the role of the PSR in his thought.

> Since now its limit is ultimate, Being is in a state of perfection from every viewpoint, like the expanse of a well-rounded sphere, and equally poised in every direction, from its center. For it must not be either at all greater or at all smaller in one regard than in another. For neither has not-Being any being which could halt [*παύοι*] the coming together of Being, nor is Being capable of being more than Being in one regard and less in another, since it is all inviolate [*ἄσυλον*]. For it is equal with itself from every view and encounters determination all alike. (B 8.42–49)

Here Parmenides stresses that being is "equally poised in every direction [ἰσοπαλὲς πάντῃ]"(B 8.44) and is "inviolate [*ἄσυλον*]" (B 8. 48). The reason Parmenides gives is that nothing can halt or stop (*παύοι* B 8.46) the coming together of being. Parmenides thus seems to say that there could be no cause, no reason, for any discontinuity, for any halting or disruption in being itself.

[17] See Mourelatos, pp. xxix, 100; see also Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, vol. 1, pp. 187–88; Sattler, *The Concept of Motion in Ancient Greek Thought*, chapter 2; Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 250; Wedin, *Parmenides' Grand Deduction*, pp. 89–91; Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides*, pp. 31n20, 76n31, 77; Owen, "Plato and Parmenides on the Timeless Present," pp. 325–26; Gregory, "Parmenides, Cosmology and Sufficient Reason," p. 29; Sedley, "Parmenides and Melissus," p. 118; Mourelatos and Pulpito, "Parmenides and the Principle of Sufficient Reason."

There is no such halting because there is no cause—no reason—for such disruption. Again, the PSR seems to be at work.[18]

(4) Consider B 8.19–21:

> And how [πῶς] could what becomes have being, how [πῶς] come into being, seeing that, if it came to be, it is not, nor is it, if at some time it is going to be? Thus becoming has been extinguished and perishing is unheard of.

Parmenides first asks *how* could what becomes have being and come into being? And he indicates that there is no such "how," no way to explain the coming into being of that which becomes. He concludes that there is no such becoming. Here the PSR-revealing word is "πῶς," "how." Because there is no "how"—no sufficient reason—for becoming, it follows that there is no becoming. Or, equivalently, invoking the contrapositive: if there is becoming, this becoming has a sufficient reason. Here again the PSR is at work. We will see in later chapters and in varied contexts how "how" is a sign of the PSR, a sign of a rationalist commitment.

(5) In B 8.23, Parmenides argues that what-is is indivisible: "nor is it divisible, since it is all alike and not any more in degree in some respect, which might keep it from (εἴργοι) uniting [or being continuous] (συνέχεσθαι)." Notice that because nothing could prevent it from being continuous—i.e. there could be no reason for discontinuity—it follows that what-is is continuous, united, and hence indivisible. Here again the PSR seems to be at work: nothing could explain the divisibility of what-is, so it is not divisible. Or, equivalently, invoking the contrapositive again: if what-is is divisible, then something could explain the divisibility of what-is.[19]

(6) Similarly, Parmenides says in B 8.32 that it is not lawful ("οὐκ . . . θέμις") that being should be incomplete (*ἀτελεύτητον*). In light of what Parmenides says in B 8.23 about there being no source for discontinuity in being, we can see this claim about the law that being not be incomplete as pointing out that there could be nothing in virtue of which being is incomplete, and so being is complete.

[18] Gregory, "Parmenides, Cosmology and Sufficient Reason," p. 36; and Mourelatos and Pulpito, "Parmenides and the Principle of Sufficient Reason," pp. 134–38; also read the sphere passage as invoking sufficient reason considerations.

[19] Sattler, *The Concept of Motion in Ancient Greek Thought*, chapter 2, also sees the PSR at work in B 8.23. See also Furth, "Elements of Eleatic Ontology," pp. 128–29.

All of these uses—implicit or not—of the PSR in these passages from the crucial fragment 8 suggest that when Parmenides says in B 6.2 that "μηδὲν δ᾽ οὐκ ἔστιν" ("non-being is not"), he makes this claim because of the PSR. As we have seen, discontinuity, division, emptiness, and incompleteness—all of which can be seen as kinds of non-being—fail to be because they could have no explanation. In the same way, the most general of these phenomena—non-being itself—also fails to be because it can have no explanation.

One might think that, although the PSR may be at work in fragment 8, it is not the primary reason that Parmenides rejects non-being and distinctions and discontinuity. It might be thought that, instead of the PSR, the driving force behind the rejection of non-being is Parmenides' view that non-being cannot be thought.[20]

In response, I have two things to say. First, it is enough for me that the PSR is playing some role—even if only a subsidiary one—in Parmenides' rejection of non-being (and distinctions). As we will see, it is Parmenides' commitment to the PSR in this stretch of text that makes a generous, less than strict, monist interpretation untenable.

Second, I grant, of course, that it is important to Parmenides' overall argument that he deny the thinkability of non-being. But, I contend, this denial is, in the end, due to Parmenides' commitment to the PSR. Because, as the implicit or explicit invocation of the PSR throughout fragment 8 shows, for Parmenides non-being cannot be explained, non-being is not intelligible and cannot be coherently conceived. We have, then, a PSR-inspired account of why non-being not only cannot be, but also cannot be thought or spoken of (B 2.7–8): "for you can neither know what is not—for that cannot be accomplished [consummated]—nor tell of it [οὔτε γὰρ ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἐόν, οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν, οὔτε φράσαις]." Because non-being is not explainable, one cannot coherently conceive of or think non-being.

Indeed, Mourelatos similarly ties Parmenides' claim that non-being cannot be said to the PSR. On p. 76, he notes that the inability to think or, as Mourelatos puts it, to single out non-being is a function of the vagueness of what-is-not. And, as I pointed out earlier, Mourelatos ties the injunction against vagueness to the PSR (p. 100). Thus, we can see that, for Mourelatos too, the inability to think non-being is a function of strictures laid down by the PSR.

[20] Timothy Clarke, Brad Inwood, and Alexander Mourelatos each stressed this point in response to the line I take here.

This exploration of PSR-infused passages in Parmenides' poem has been, in part, in the service of showing exactly how defenders of a moderate or non-strict monist reading of Parmenides see him as arguing when he rejects constitutive negation, i.e. negation or differentiation that is built into the nature of a thing. Parmenides rules out constitutive negation because of his commitment to the PSR. And we've seen that this PSR-based understanding of Parmenides' reasons for rejecting constitutive negation can be and, at least in some cases, has been embraced by generous monist interpreters.

But it is striking here that, as we will soon see, each of these interpretive moves on behalf of a non-strict monist interpretation can be embraced also by a strict monist interpretation. That is, the same explanatory, PSR-driven considerations that a non-strict monist can appeal to support the claim that non-being is not and cannot be thought can also be advanced by a strict monist.

OK, but where then do the non-strict monist and the strict monist interpreters differ when it comes to the rationalist underpinnings of their divergent interpretations? As I noted, the key difference between these two interpretations lies in the kind of negation that is ruled out. The non-strict monist interpreter sees Parmenides as excluding only constitutive negation, not negation in general, whereas the strict monist interpreter sees Parmenides as rejecting negation in general. It is the non-strict monist interpreters' more limited rejection of negation that enables them to make room for multiplicity: non-constitutive or supervenient or external negation makes possible the multiplicity that non-strict monist interpreters are eager to preserve.

However, given the shared commitment to seeing Parmenides as guided by explanation and by the PSR, this multiplicity championed by non-strict monism is in a very precarious position. The non-strict monist interpreter, I will argue, is not able to justify the restriction on negation to constitutive negation. Indeed, such an interpreter's rejection of only constitutive negation is, I will argue, incoherent. By contrast, the strict monist interpreter's blanket rejection of negation does not suffer from the incoherence of the more limited rejection of negation. I thus want to argue that the PSR—which is endorsed in one way or another on all sides on Parmenides' behalf—puts significant pressure on an interpreter to reject not only so-called constitutive negation, but also negation in general.

How does the PSR lead to the rejection of negation in general? Let's take an example of a purported constitutive negation that is rejected—for reasons stemming from the PSR—by a generous monist interpreter:

x (really) originates at t_1 and *not* at t_2.

The "really" in parentheses is meant to specify that this is a case of constitutive predication of the kind that Mourelatos and non-strict monist interpreters are interested in. The presence of the "not" is one of the things that makes this predication a negation: it appeals to differences at least of times. As we've seen, Mourelatos and others reject such constitutive negation because of the PSR and because of the brute fact that really originating at t1 rather than at t2 would involve.

But now take a case of purported non-constitutive negation (or external negation or supervenient negation), the kind of negation that would be acceptable to a non-strict monist interpreter. To see an example of such a purported non-constitutive negation, just remove the "(really)" from the above sentence. Thus, we have:

x originates at t_1 and *not* at t_2.

The predication here is not constitutive, does not specify the nature of *x* or its identity in the way that Mourelatos and other interpreters stipulate that speculative predication does. The predication here is also clearly a negation, and so we have a purported case of non-constitutive negation.

Now take this sentence, apply the PSR—which, as we have seen, all sides attribute to Parmenides—and let's see what happens. Given the PSR, we can ask: why is it the case that *x* (non-constitutively) originates at t_1 rather than at t_2? Originating at t_1 rather than at t_2 seems just as arbitrary and brute in the non-constitutive case as in the previous, constitutive case. A similar PSR argument could also be deployed in other cases of purported non-constitutive negation. So, given Parmenides' commitment to the PSR, he would seem to be also committed to rejecting non-constitutive negation, just as he is committed to rejecting constitutive negation.

But wait! Perhaps there is a reason that *x* (non-constitutively) originates at t_1 and not at t_2 and so there is no violation of the PSR here: perhaps *x* originates at t_1 because of the action of some distinct thing *y* which acted at t_0. But here we have to ask: why did *y* act at t_0 instead of some other time?

Perhaps we can at this point appeal to something else, *z*, which acted at some earlier time, t_{-1} (t-negative-1). But, of course, another invocation of the PSR is relevant here too, and we seem to be off on an infinite regress. We seem to be at sea again, in search of a resting place but unable to find one. Recall Parmenides' emphasis on incompleteness and on what is *ἀνυστόν*, being unconsummated (B 2.6).

Perhaps one might say that this regress is not troubling because there is a being outside the chain of dependent beings (*y, z*, etc.) that leads to *x*'s origination at t1. That is, perhaps there is a being outside the series, a being like the God of the cosmological argument who shows up in the works of philosophers much later than Parmenides, such as Leibniz. This being would stand outside the series of dependencies that link beings such as *x*, *y*, and *z*.

It's not clear whether it's appropriate to consider something like the God of the cosmological argument in connection with Parmenides, but in any event, it's also far from clear than an appeal to such a being would address the explanatory questions that have arisen because of Parmenides' commitment to the PSR. For we can ask: in virtue of what are the God-like being and the series of dependent beings distinct? The PSR demands an answer here, but what would the answer be? If you say that the distinction between the God-like being and the dependent beings is part of the nature of one or the other of God and the dependent beings, then we have a case of constitutive negation, a phenomenon that the generous monist interpreter has already ruled out. If the distinction is not part of the nature of either God or the dependent beings, then why does this distinction obtain instead of not obtain? Again, the PSR demands an answer here, and it's not clear what the reason could be. The distinction between God and the dependent beings—if non-constitutive—seems arbitrary and brute.

So non-constitutive negation—as well as constitutive negation—seems to be ruled out by the PSR. This puts non-strict monist interpreters in a quandary: they endorse attributing the PSR to Parmenides and yet also want to allow non-constitutive negation and to allow, therefore, multiplicity. But it seems that they cannot have both. PSR and multiplicity, one but not the other.

All of this maneuvering against a generous monist reading may seem too quick. Perhaps I wasn't nuanced enough in the way I invoked the PSR to rule out non-constitutive negation. In particular, perhaps my formulation of the PSR was not subtle enough. I was, in effect, invoking a version of the PSR along these lines:

Each fact or predication is explainable.

But perhaps, in light of the non-strict monist's distinction between constitutive and non-constitutive negation, we should reformulate the version of the PSR that Parmenides endorses in this way:

Each constitutive fact or predication is explainable.

According to this version of the PSR, anything's being constitutively F is explainable, but it need not be the case that something's being non-constitutively F is explainable. In light of this nuanced version of the PSR, the claim that *x* (non-constitutively) originates at t_1 and not at t_2 need not be explained. This non-constitutive fact may be arbitrary and brute and unexplained, but that's OK as far as the more nuanced version of the PSR is concerned. So perhaps the non-strict monist interpreter—by appealing to the nuanced version of the PSR—can avoid the challenge I have raised.

However, even if we adopt the nuanced PSR, a version of the key question still arises. Given that (as the non-strict monist interpreter insists and as the nuanced PSR states) all constitutive predication must be explained, why isn't it the case that non-constitutive predication needs to be explained as well? If bruteness and arbitrariness and being-at-sea-ness is a worry with constitutive negation, then why is it not equally a worry with non-constitutive negation? If we're concerned about bruteness and arbitrariness and being-at-sea-ness, then we're concerned about bruteness and arbitrariness and being-at-sea-ness. Why should it matter whether the bruteness and arbitrariness and being-at-sea-ness occurs in so-called constitutive contexts or not?

Perhaps a "generous" monist interpreter could just stipulate that constitutive predication requires explanation and non-constitutive predication does not. But this move is hardly illuminating. It still leaves us in the dark as to why constitutive predications require explanation but non-constitutive predications do not. This move is, ultimately, question-begging against the proponent of the non-nuanced version of the PSR and is thus not a welcome position with which to saddle Parmenides. And so there is, again, pressure on the non-strict monist to regard both constitutive and non-constitutive negations as requiring explanation and thus there is pressure on the non-strict monist to adopt a non-nuanced version of the PSR and thus to adopt a strict form of monism. And this is the ultimately incoherent position with which the non-strict monist interpreter is faced.

In effect, the problem for the non-strict monist interpreter lies in trying to limit the PSR, lies in saying that the PSR applies to some facts and not others. We will see this sad and, perhaps, tragic dynamic again and again in what follows: an admirable concern for intelligibility and for sufficient reason is curtailed, cut down in its prime, just when this rationalist drive threatens (or promises) to lead to a position which it seems "no serious metaphysician should want to adopt."[21] But by pulling up one's horses at this crucial moment, incoherence is the unfortunate and unintended result.

This challenge to the generous monist interpreter and to the proponent of the nuanced PSR is dialectical. Generous monist interpreters employ a style of argumentation that threatens to carry them off on a journey into a region—the region of strict monism—that they (really!) want to avoid. But they may have no means of resisting such a journey. And in this way, the generous monist interpreter is threatened with incoherence.

We will see, however, that a strict monism may face its own threat of incoherence. But that is a topic for much later (chapter 9), after we have considered and subject to destruction a number of other standard, generous, non-strict positions in a wide range of philosophical areas. For now, the problem for the generous monist interpreter is this: given the acceptance of some form of the PSR, there is considerable pressure on such an interpreter to go all the way and to reject not just constitutive negation, but also negation in general. (And, indeed, one can be forgiven for suspecting at this point that it makes no sense to distinguish constitutive negation and negation in general.) Thus, there is pressure on such an interpreter to attribute a strict, non-generous form of monism to Parmenides. By contrast, given the PSR, there is no comparable pressure on the strict monist interpreter to adopt a non-strict monist reading.

Parmenides, as I understand him, argues from the PSR—or from considerations grounded in the PSR—to strict monism and to a general rejection of distinctions. The non-strict monist position may seem superficially more plausible, but the strict monist position seems to be more in keeping with the rationalist principle that guides Parmenides' thought.

In moving from the PSR to a strict form of monism—perhaps stronger than even existence monism and certainly stronger than priority monism—Parmenides is anticipating certain later thinkers who also, in my opinion, appreciate the link between the PSR and a strong form of monism. Although

[21] Palmer, "Parmenides," and *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy*, p. 38.

I won't dwell on their views in this book, I would like to point out that Spinoza and Hume agree (surprisingly, perhaps) that the PSR entails a strong form of monism. In Hume's case, the focus may actually be on the contrapositive: the denial of monism entails the denial of the PSR. Hume wants to avoid monism, and so he rejects the PSR which entails monism. By contrast, Spinoza embraces the PSR and so he happily endorses monism.[22] Exactly what strength Spinoza's monism has is a delicate matter of considerable debate. But I have argued that his version of monism is akin to the strict version of monism that I have attributed to Parmenides.[23] Further, as I will argue in chapter 3, F. H. Bradley very much appreciates this link between the PSR and a strong version of monism. It is Bradley's argument for this conclusion—or an argument like Bradley's—that will drive much of the progress of this book. And, as I will discuss in chapter 11, Russell plays the role in relation to Bradley that Hume plays in relation to Spinoza. Russell too sees how the PSR entails monism and, like Hume, Russell avoids monism by denying the PSR. We'll return to the debate between Bradley and Russell in due course, but for now we can see that the original version of the move from the PSR to a strong form of monism may be found in Parmenides. And we can see that Parmenides' argument calls us from across the ages and can serve as a model of a powerful, uncompromisingly rationalist approach that has infused much philosophy in the past and that promises to inspire us even today.

In making the move from the PSR to a strict version of monism and to a denial of distinctions, we can see Parmenides as leaving behind the everyday world—or the world as ordinarily understood, the world as rife with distinctions such as the duality of night and day, distinctions on which he or the goddess dwells in the second half of the poem, the Doxa. In making this move, Parmenides is not—on my strict monist interpretation—leaving anything real or intelligible behind, and this is because nothing that is permeated by distinctions and thus by non-being is real, genuinely exists. Indeed, no such thing is genuinely thinkable. For Parmenides, the reality that we were imperfectly trying to capture when we were on the path of non-being

[22] For this kind of pairing of Spinoza and Hume, see Della Rocca, "Playing with Fire." I will return to this Spinoza-Hume connection in chapter 10.

[23] See Della Rocca, "Rationalism, Idealism, Monism, and Beyond," and "The Elusiveness of the One and the Many in Spinoza: Substance, Attribute, and Mode." For reasons to resist this Parmenidean reading of Spinoza, see Melamed, "The Sirens of Elea." Spinoza also endorses Mourelatos' Parmenidean view that an essence cannot contain any negation. However, Spinoza does not, on my interpretation, go on to allow that there are legitimate non-essential negations. See Della Rocca, "Perseverance, Power, and Eternity: Purely Positive Essence in Spinoza."

is better captured by our talk of being without distinction. With this abandonment of any distinctions, Parmenides makes what I call in his honor, the Parmenidean Ascent: he rejects distinctions as unintelligible or even unthinkable, and he advances to a view that does not posit any distinctions. There is no loss of reality—no failure to explain something real—when Parmenides makes the Parmenidean Ascent. Indeed, there is a gain because with this ascent Parmenides sees the world aright. Parmenides' extreme monistic view is thus far richer than we might have thought, for, by getting rid of distinctions, Parmenides is no longer encumbered by unintelligibility or is, at least, less encumbered.

One can imagine more limited versions of the Parmenidean Ascent, ones in which not distinctions in general are rejected, but rather a certain distinction between two phenomena or, to speak redundantly perhaps, two apparent phenomena is rejected. The less general Parmenidean move would be to regard this particular distinction as unintelligible, and the move would also be, therefore, to rise above one thing as distinct from another. In so ascending, the aim is to capture the reality that we were hoping to capture with a distinction by instead eliding the distinction and appealing to some being—or, better perhaps, simply to being—without the distinction. In making this move, we would thus be led to reconceptualize the phenomenon under discussion. I will be making such apparently relatively limited versions of the Parmenidean Ascent in a number of the chapters to follow, and I will be endorsing the general Parmenidean Ascent as well. We will also see signs on a few occasions of relatively limited Parmenidean moves by more recent philosophers, instances that are some of the most prominent arguments in recent philosophy.

But, despite these bright spots of late, recent and contemporary philosophers almost without exception do not, as I have mentioned, engage explicitly with the strict monism of Parmenides, and they are not keen to make any form of the Parmenidean Ascent.[24] Philosophers, of late at least, tend to be, in other words, afraid of heights.

To understand and explore this acrophobia and to take some steps towards a cure, I want to examine a number of central topics in philosophy through a Parmenidean lens. And so we have the project of this book.

[24] For an excellent and refreshing endeavor against this overwhelming tide in recent philosophy, see Matson, *Grand Theories and Everyday Beliefs*.