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PARMENIDES AND THE GRAMMAR OF BEING

LUIS ANDRÉS BREDLOW

THE AIM OF THIS PAPER is to explore some grammatical and logical aspects of the word “is” (ἐστί) in the fragments of Parmenides. I will argue that Parmenides’ “is” is to be taken most plausibly, in its first and most immediate sense, as a copula of definitional identity, expressing the essence or nature of something. This definitional use implies both the absolute and the veridical sense of “is.” This account will permit us to overcome some central difficulties inherent in other predicative interpretations of Parmenides’ “is,” such as those proposed by Alexander Mourelatos, Richard Ketchum, and Patricia Curd.¹

At the beginning of her discourse, the goddess points out the ways of inquiry that alone can be conceived (B2.3–8):

ἡ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὥς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι,
πειθοῦς ἐστι κέλευθος (ἀληθείη γὰρ ὀπηδεῖ),
ἡ δ’ ὥς οὐκ ἔστιν τε καὶ ὥς χρεῶν ἐστι μὴ εἶναι,
τὴν δὴ τοι φράζω παναπευθέα ἔμμεν ἀταρπόν·
οὔτε γὰρ ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἔδον (οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν),
οὔτε φράσσεις.

Any interpretation of this crucial passage has to begin by answering two related questions: (1) what is the subject of “is” at B2.3 and 5? and (2) what is the sense of the word “is”?

As for question (1), there is widely shared consensus in recent scholarship that we are not meant to supply any implicit subject of “is,” such as “reality,” “truth,” and so on.² This seems to leave us with the following alternative: (1a) we might understand the routes of “is” and “is not” as not representing actual propositions or theses, but rather “types of proposition, propositional functions or sentence frames”³ (“*x* is *F*,” “*x* exists,” etc.); or (1b) we might take “is” as implying its own subject (and perhaps its own predicate). On the latter reading, “is” would be understood as saying something like “what-is

1. For the interpretation of Parmenides’ “is” I will propose, I am indebted to some suggestions of Agustín García Calvo (1981, 1996). I am also indebted to the two anonymous referees of *CP* for helpful comments and criticism on earlier versions of this paper, and to Elizabeth Asmis for her detailed suggestions for stylistic improvement.

2. A recent exception is Gemelli Marciano (2009, 65, 68, 88), who holds that the subject of “is” is “all things” (B8.38, where we are given the “solution of the riddle”).

3. Mourelatos 1979, 3; cf. Mourelatos 1970, 51–60, for a more detailed account. This line of interpretation goes back to Calogero (1932, chap. 1).

is,” “what-there-is is what-there-is.”⁴ The solution I will argue for in this paper could be seen as a synthesis of both possibilities: Parmenides’ argument sets out to establish the logical conditions of what it means to be something, and ends up leading us to identify “what-is” or “what-there-is” (without any further qualification) as the only legitimate subject of “is.”

For question (2) there is a widely divergent range of answers available in the literature: “is” has been interpreted as existential (“ x exists”), veridical (“It is the case that p ”), predicative (“ x is F ”), or a fusion of these senses. At any rate, it seems clear that the rejection of the way of “is not” is argued for at B2 on the grounds that one cannot know what-is-not, nor express it or talk of it (or show the way to it or point it out, depending on how one prefers to translate $\phi\rho\acute{\alpha}\xi\epsilon\iota\nu$). On the existential interpretation, this argument becomes utterly unsound:⁵ of course we can talk of the nonexistent,⁶ maybe even know it. We can know, to begin with, that it does not exist, which may well be the only thing worth knowing about it. On occasion, this may even be an important insight: one may find out, for example, that there is no void, no life on Mars, or no rational square root of 2. Therefore, to rule out statements of inexistence as illegitimate would betray a rather awkward understanding of scientific inquiry, even for an Archaic thinker.

Moreover, it is at least doubtful that $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$, even in later philosophical use, should be understood as equivalent to the verb “exist” in modern languages. For example, as Charles H. Kahn and Uvo Hölscher have convincingly shown, none of the four meanings of $\tau\acute{o}\ \acute{o}\nu$ discussed by Aristotle at *Metaphysics* 5.7 can be identified as properly “existential” in the modern sense, that is, as neatly detached from the copula or predicative use.⁷ So it seems quite safe to conclude, with Kahn, that “the Greeks did not have our notion of existence”⁸ (even though Kahn’s own “veridical” interpretation of Parmenides’ “is” as primarily referring to a Wittgensteinian “Bestehen von Sachverhalten”⁹ seems hardly less anachronistic¹⁰).

4. See Bollack 1965, 3: 143 (cf. 2006, 20, 113–16); Cassin 1980, 55; García Calvo 1981, 176; Cordero 1984, 77, and 2004, 60–64; Finkelberg 1988, 45.

5. So do, in fact, almost all of Parmenides’ arguments. As Ketchum (1990, 186) rightly states, “Most of what Parmenides tells us about why what-is-not is unthinkable, etc., is false and, if I may say so, fairly obviously false on the existence interpretation.”

6. “We can, of course; mermaids, for instance,” argues Owen (1960, 94 n. 1).

7. Kahn 1966, 248–49; Hölscher 1976, 13–31. On the absence of a neat distinction between existential and predicative uses of “is” in Aristotle, see also Hintikka 1986; Brown 1994; and Bäck 2000; on the absence of a notion of “existence” in the modern sense in ancient Greek, cf. Graham 1965, 224–25; Heitsch 1974, 106–11; and Kahn 1976 and 1979.

8. Kahn 1966, 248; cf. Kahn 1973 and 1976.

9. Kahn 1966, 251, 262; cf. Kahn 1968, 711–13.

10. Against Kahn’s interpretation, Mourelatos (1968, 742) points out that the Greeks “conceived of the world as the totality of things” and not of facts, as Wittgenstein did in the *Tractatus*; similar objections were raised by Hölscher (1976, 48) and Kłowski (1977, 111). For more detailed criticism of Kahn’s theory of the veridical use of Greek “is,” see Benardete 1977 and Matthen 1983. It should be noted, however, that in his more recent work Kahn (2002, 2004, 2005) has modified his views considerably. Nevertheless, he is still convinced that the veridical sense “fits best with Parmenides’ claim that ‘you cannot know what-is-not’ (fr. 2.7), although other values of *einai* are also required for his argument” (Kahn 2004, 391 n. 14). But on this interpretation, as Kahn has to acknowledge, Parmenides’ argument still ends up in fallacy and confusion (Kahn 2002, 90; cf. below, n. 16).

Consequently there has been an increasing number of recent scholars who prefer to understand Parmenides' "is" in a mainly predicative sense, that is, as functioning like the copula in propositions of the form " x is F ."¹¹ I think this goes in the right direction; however, some qualifications seem necessary.

In the first place, a predicative interpretation should not be taken to imply that the predicative sense of "is" is the only one that should be taken into consideration. A predicative interpretation, as I see it, is compatible with a "fused"—or rather, undifferentiated—notion of being, covering various uses that modern logic distinguishes from one another, including the predicative, veridical, and absolute or "existential" uses.¹² This seems indeed to be the most "natural" understanding of Parmenides' "is," the one that comes closest to current uses of ἐστί/ἔστι both in ordinary Greek language and in philosophy. However, this assumption leaves still open the question how exactly these various senses of "is" are related to one another. For example, is the "fused" sense to be taken as a mere juxtaposition, or rather as an organically articulated structure, within which some specific use(s) of "is" may prove to be more fundamental than others? At any rate, a fusion of these various senses of "is" (preserving logical consistency) should be distinguished from their simple confusion (which would make Parmenides' reasoning depend on some fallacy of equivocation).¹³

Second, and more importantly, the predicative reading of "is" is in itself open to different interpretations. Ketchum, for example, suggests that Parmenides' "to be," in its relevant syntactically incomplete occurrences, is to be taken as meaning "to be something or other."¹⁴ Hence its negation, "not to be," would be equivalent to "not to be anything at all." This seems to make quite good sense of the rejection of "is not" at B2: whatever we are inquiring into either is something or other, or it is not anything at all. The second term of the alternative is rightfully ruled out by the goddess as "a path entirely unlearnable," since what is not anything at all cannot be known or described or pointed out.¹⁵

On this interpretation, however, as Ketchum himself acknowledges, the argument begins to lose its cogency at B8.6–7. In these verses, Parmenides argues that what-is cannot have come to be from what is not, "for it is not sayable or thinkable that it is not." Parmenides' assumption is that, if what-is has come to be, then there must have been a time at which it was not, which

11. See Mourelatos 1970 and 1975; Austin 1986; Ketchum 1990; Curd 1998b, 34–63. Earlier proponents of a predicative reading of Parmenides' "is" were Hoffmann 1925, 8; Cassirer 1925, 41; and Calogero 1932.

12. A "fused" sense of "is"—though with a strong focus on the existential component—was suggested by Furth (1974 [originally published 1968]); cf. also Furley 1973, 13–14, and Goldin 1993, 20 n. 1. A fused—"or rather undifferentiated"—meaning of "is" centered on the predicational use has been most explicitly advocated, though not developed in detail, by Kerferd 1972. For Hintikka (1980, 6), the decisive feature of Parmenides' conceptual framework is "the absence of any distinction between what we twentieth-century philosophers would take to be different senses of 'is' . . . viz. the 'is' of existence, the 'is' of predication, and the 'is' of identity."

13. This sort of fallacy (confusion of the predicative and the existential "is") was attributed to Parmenides by Calogero 1932, followed by, among others, Kirk and Raven 1957, 270; but this charge is generally rejected in more recent literature (see Mourelatos 1979, 3).

14. Ketchum 1990, 167–68.

15. Ketchum 1990, 173–75.

according to B2 is impossible. Stated this way, however, the argument is ambiguous. At first sight, we might understand that, if what is something or other has come to be a thing that is something or other, then there must have been a time at which it was nothing at all. This would be true enough; but it does not warrant Parmenides' conclusion that what-is must be eternal and ungenerated. There still remains the possibility that what is something or other (for example, *F*) might have come to be what it is now, *F*, after having been something different (for example, *G*). There would be no need of there having been any time at which it was not anything at all. In order to conclude that what-is is ungenerated, Parmenides would need a different kind of argument: he would have to assume that, if what is *F* has come to be *F*, then there must have been a time at which it was not anything at all. Now this is clearly a non sequitur. We would have to conclude that Parmenides, caught up in the traps of his language, failed to see that a thing can fail to be something or other (to have a particular predicate) without being nothing at all (or failing to have any predicate at all). In other words, he confused "is not something" ("is not *F*") with "is not anything."¹⁶

This seems rather unsatisfactory. Of course, we cannot exclude a priori the possibility that some of Parmenides' reasoning might be fallacious after all. Nonetheless, I think we should not be ready to resign ourselves to this conclusion unless we have made sure there is no consistent—and at the same time historically and philologically plausible—reconstruction of his argument available. A proposal that comes quite close to meeting this triple requirement is the one offered by Curd in her *Legacy of Parmenides*, elaborating on some earlier suggestions by Mourelatos. Curd takes Parmenides' "is" to be "an informative identity claim, an assertion that, when true, reveals the nature of a thing, saying just what something is," insofar as "what we know in knowing what-is is the real or genuine character of a thing."¹⁷

This interpretation places Parmenides in his proper Greek context, since it clearly connects his notion of Being with the Ionian quest for the *physis* or nature of things. Moreover, it permits us to make reasonable sense of his argument against coming-to-be: "Whatever something genuinely is cannot be something that becomes; it must always remain what it is."¹⁸ Thus Parmenides' argument against coming-to-be (as well as the rest of his arguments in B8, as Curd has quite accurately shown) is consistent if we take it as referring specifically to predications concerning the genuine nature or essence of things. I think this view is basically right. However, Mourelatos (1999) has pointed out two central difficulties inherent to Curd's account (and to his own, as he readily acknowledges).

In the first place, both interpretations seem to require rather severe restrictions on the range of possible subject and/or predicate terms for "is." On

16. Ketchum 1990, 180–82. Similarly, Kahn (2002, 90) holds that for Parmenides, "[d]epending on which function of *einai* is being denied, *to mē on* can represent either negative predication, falsehood, non-identity, non-existence, or non-entity, that is to say, nothing at all. The fallacy in Parmenides' argument lies . . . in the confused union of these various modes of negation in the single conception of 'what-is-not.'"

17. Curd 1998b, 39.

18. Curd 1998b, 77. In a very similar sense, Mourelatos (1970, 107) had already stated: "What a thing *gets* to be (or *comes* to be) is not what the thing really is, i.e. in its essence or nature."

Mourelatos' account, the "x" of the Parmenidean "x is F" scheme "ranges over any and all ordinary physical objects, whereas the 'F' ranges over the *physis* or *alêtheia* ('nature,' 'reality,' or 'true identity') of the ordinary object at issue," like in claims such as "Wool *is* compacted air," "This world *is* ever-living fire," and so on.¹⁹ On Curd's interpretation, it is already the subject term of "is"—the "x" of the "x is F" scheme—that is to be seen as restricted to a quite special kind of entities: "Parmenides' subject is an entity of a certain kind, one that plays a fundamental role in an explanation of what there is." In other words, the subject of "is" "can only be something that would count as a basic entity in an explanation of how things are."²⁰

So it seems, at any rate, that in order to make sense of Parmenides' arguments we have to assume that these are meant to be understood as being true only if referring to a rather special kind of subject or predicate. But since both the subject and the predicate terms of "is" are elided or merely implicit, such a proposal is indeed open to the objection of "specious complexity and artificiality," especially if this restriction is taken to affect not only the predicate, but also the subject of "is."²¹

The second difficulty concerns the motive for the rejection of the route of "is not." For Curd, as for Mourelatos, this motive is to be found in the vagueness inherent in any negative statement about the nature or essence of things: "For what would it be to give a negative account of what something really is? It would be to say 'it is not this, or this, or this . . . ' and such a route can never be completed; it is not *anyston*. Something that is negative in this sense would be nothing in particular, and it is clear that one cannot think of something that is nothing in particular."²² In a similar vein, Mourelatos had put the question: "Where do I go if I am told to go to 'not-Ithaca'? . . . It is fated to be a journey of *πλάνη*, of regress and wandering." In a word, the route of "is not" is "a route of vagueness in the ancient and literal sense of 'vagraney' and 'divagation.'"²³

But to this line of argument, as Mourelatos himself acknowledges, one might all too easily object that negative statements need not be always vague, indeterminate, or uninformative. Some negative statements may have a quite determinate meaning, especially if the negated predicate term bears a relation of complementarity (or "enantiomorphy," as Curd terms it) to some other well-defined positive term: for example, to be "up" just means to be "not-down," and vice versa; to be "light" means to be "not-dark," and vice versa. Such a relation of complementary opposition is precisely the one that exists between the two elements of the erroneous worldview of mortals in the *Doxa*: "Night" is precisely "not-Light," and vice versa. So if Parmenides ruled out

19. Mourelatos 1999, 120.

20. Curd 1998b, 39 n. 42, 40 n. 46.

21. Mourelatos 1999, 121. Similarly, Graham (2006, 158) observes that on the predicative view Parmenides' argument at B2.6–8 "assumes a great deal of prior understanding on the part of the reader." Graham considers this a decisive objection to the predicative reading.

22. Curd 1998b, 49; cf. 61: "To say that X is really not-F, or to attribute to X a nature or character that contains negative elements is to make a statement that is steeped in vagueness, which gives one nothing on which to pin one's thought."

23. Mourelatos 1970, 78.

this conception on the ground that negative statements are necessarily vague and indeterminate, we would have to conclude that he committed the error of “assimilating the conceptually and semantically well-charted privation involved in enantiomorphy with the bald and inchoate ‘is really not-*F*’ of the second route of inquiry cited in B2.”²⁴

It should be noted that this second difficulty is closely related to the first. The exclusion of negative statements as vague or uninformative only seems plausible if referring to a rather special kind of subject. As Mourelatos points out, on his view the rejection of the negative route at B2 is not a rejection of negative predication in general, but rather “a rejection of negative attributes in answer to speculative, cosmological questions.”²⁵ Moreover, a further restriction has to be put on possible predicate terms. A statement of the form “*x* is not *F*” is indeed incurably vague if *F* is a proper name or an individual term: to know that something is “not Ithaca” or “not Socrates” hardly qualifies as knowing what this thing really is. But it will be much less vague if *F* is a common term defined within a genus or family (for example, “not blue” is naturally understood as meaning “any other color but blue”). And it is clearly not vague if *F* is one of a pair of complementary or “enantiomorphic” terms, such as “up”/“down,” “light”/“darkness,” and so on. Consequently Mourelatos was drawn to stipulate, in his *Route of Parmenides*, that the predicate terms of the “*x* is *F*” scheme have to be “of the categorial rank of *individuals*.”²⁶ This seems rather gratuitous. In his later writings, Mourelatos insists that we can make sense of Parmenides’ argument against negative statements only if we suppose him committed to a “naïve metaphysics of things.” Such metaphysics, according to Mourelatos, envisaged the world as consisting of “distinct self-contained entities, each of which can be grasped by a mere act of acquaintance.” Parmenides, lacking the conception of a genuine predicate, was unaware of the difference between predicates and proper names.²⁷ In the end, this is precisely the kind of solution one would have rather preferred to avoid: that is, the all-too-familiar expedient of saddling our philosopher with some kind of “naïve” or “primitive” logic or metaphysics in order to excuse the apparent flaws of his argument.

I think, however, that there is a way of understanding Parmenides’ “is” that allows us to overcome both difficulties. It is not very far from those proposed by Mourelatos and Curd, and compatible with what is most valuable and interesting in their contributions. To begin with the first problem: the need for artificial restrictions to the range of possible subject or predicate terms for “is” could evidently be avoided if it could be shown that the restrictions needed to make sense of Parmenides’ arguments are already implicit in the logical functioning of the word “is” itself, such as Parmenides means us to understand it.

24. Mourelatos 1999, 124.

25. Mourelatos 1970, 75.

26. Mourelatos 1970, 79.

27. Mourelatos 1973, 19, 43; cf. Mourelatos 1975 and 1999, 122, 124.

I suggest that this is precisely what we obtain if taking Parmenides' "is" as what Kahn calls a "verb of whatness" or the "is" of definitional identity.²⁸ The "is" of whatness expresses what something is by definition, its essence or nature. It is the "is" we find in the Socratic question τί ἐστὶ, in Plato's (τὸ) ὅ ἐστι, and Aristotle's τὸ τί ἐστὶ and τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, but also in the Ionian inquiry into the *physis* or nature of things.

The most characteristic trait of definitional predication, as I understand it, is the implication that the predicate expresses something inherent in the genuine nature or character of something or somebody. It means that the predicate belongs to its subject essentially, constitutively, and inseparably. What a definitional predication says is that "*x* is *F*" in such a way that *x* cannot ever fail to be *F* under any circumstances. This comes quite close to what in modern philosophy is called an analytical proposition, but with at least one important difference: a definitional predication, in the Greek sense, is not true by virtue of meaning alone. It is only true insofar as it refers to some real thing and expresses the genuine nature of this thing. The truth of such a predication is not assured by the meaning of words, as with the analytical propositions of modern philosophy, but by the very nature of things themselves.

This approach allows us some useful specifications concerning the "fused" or undifferentiated sense of "is." In the first place, the definitional interpretation does not exclude the "absolute" sense of ἐστὶ, habitually translated by "there is,"²⁹ but rather implies it: only what there is can have an essence or nature. Indeed, it seems unlikely that anyone who was not acquainted with the refinements of modern (or, for that matter, medieval) logic would have suspected that there could be an essence or nature, or even a true definition, of something that there is not or that does not exist.³⁰ It should be noted that the inverse implication probably does not obtain: the examples of Anaximander's ἄπειρον, Plato's χώρα, or the Stoic concept of ὕλη suggest that Greek philosophers could quite well conceive of there being something that had no definite or definable essence at all.

Very much of the same goes for the veridical sense of "is": to define the essence or nature of something is to define what this thing truly or really is. To put it the other way round: to know the truth about something is to know its essence or nature, to know what this thing really *is*. So Parmenides is indeed concerned with the truth of statements, though of a quite peculiar kind: statements expressing essence or definitional identity. In a word, the definitional or "whatness" sense of "is" implies both the absolute and the veridical sense, but is not implied by either of these.³¹

28. Kahn 1966, 262–63; 1979, 29 n. 13.

29. This "absolute" sense is not exactly the same as the supposed existential sense of "is": see Kahn 1966, esp. 247–48; cf. also Ketchum 1990, 170 n. 6; Sedley 1999, 115.

30. According to Aristotle (*An. post.* 2.7.92b4–8), there can be definitions only of really existing things. The medieval notion of an essence (*essentia*, *quidditas*) entirely independent from actual existence (as in, e.g., Thomas of Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, 4.97–102) is clearly contrary to Aristotle's own thought.

31. It might be remarked that these implications hold already for the predicative or copula use of "is" in Greek in general, of which the definitional or "whatness" use is a special case. A predicative assertion ("*x* is *F*") normally implies the existence of its subject, as well as the truth of what it asserts. Inversely, existence or truth claims regularly imply some predicative proposition (see Kahn 2004), though not necessarily a predication of definitional identity.

That Parmenides means us to understand his “is” in precisely this definitional sense is indicated already by the modal qualifier contained in the crucial assertion “It is and cannot not be” (B2.3). If this is meant to be one statement and not two,³² we probably have to understand it as: “It is *F* in such a way that it is not possible for it not to be *F*.” This is most prominently the case of definitional predication, since it is obviously impossible for something not to be what it is by definition. In terms of Parmenidean imagery, definition is the “limit” (B8.26, 31, 42) in whose bonds (B8.26–31) what-is is held by the forceful necessity (B8.30) of being what it is.³³ As A. H. Coxon put it, “is” means that “its subject is something, and that being this precludes it . . . from not being what it is and a fortiori from not being anything at all.”³⁴

This elementary assumption of logic, if applied with sufficient intransigence, may well account for all of Parmenides’ theorems in B8. To begin with, if *x* is, by definition, *F* (or *F* is the essence or nature of *x*), then *x* cannot have become *F*, nor ever cease to be *F*, for in either case it would be true at some moment that “*x* is not *F*,” which contradicts the hypothesis (cf. B8.5–21). The all-too-obvious objection to this argument is that *x* might have begun to exist, or may cease to exist altogether at some moment, without ever being *x* and not being *F* at the same time. This objection would probably be met by Parmenides’ arguing that, since *x* cannot have come to be out of nothing (B8.7–10), there must be some entity *y* which at some moment has become—or ceases to be—*x* and, therefore, *F*. Hence *F* would properly be a predicate of *y* rather than of *x*. But since *y* has become (or ceases to be) *F*, it is evident that *F* cannot be the essence or nature of *y*. Whatever other term we may choose, the argument will repeat itself until we arrive at some predicate term *F* such that *x* cannot ever have become *F*, nor cease to be *F*.

For similar reasons, *x* cannot be more or less *F* in some of its parts than in others (B8.22–25), since something either is or is not *F*, with no intermediate degrees (B8.11, 16). If *x* lacks anything to be *F*, it lacks everything, that is, it is not *F* (B8.32–33). Even minimal change is excluded (B8.26–31), probably on the ground that, once the possibility of change is admitted, any precise limit between essential and inessential changes would depend on arbitrary convention, and not on the nature of the thing itself.³⁵ To summarize, in the words of Curd, for Parmenides “to be is to be the genuine nature of a thing, to be just what a thing is; to be such a nature, something must be what it is unchangingly, completely, and as a unity.”³⁶ From this it follows that, inversely, the objects of ordinary reality, reputed by mortals to come to be, change, and perish, cannot properly be in the strict logical sense required by the goddess’ reasoning, but only by dint of human convention (B8.38–41).

32. Note that the modal qualifier “and cannot not be” is omitted in the mentions of the first way we find later on in the text (ὅς ἐστιν, B8.2; ἔστιν ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν, B8.16).

33. See Heitsch 1974, 175; García Calvo 1996, 14; cf. Tarán 1965, 117, 151. It seems significant that the technical terms for “definition” used in later Greek philosophy (ὅρος, ὁρίζειν, ὁρισμός) draw on the very same image of the “limit” which was first employed by Parmenides (πέρας, B8.26, 31, 42, 49).

34. Coxon 1986, 175.

35. This is well illustrated by the Sorites paradox: see Wheeler 1983, 293–94; cf. also Melissus B7.2.

36. Curd 1998a, 20.

So the fact that “is,” in the Parmenidean sense, can be truly asserted only of some very special kind of entity (which must be eternal, unchanging, etc.) results as the logical outcome of the whole argument. There is no need to suppose that such a restriction is implicitly postulated by his reasoning from the outset.³⁷ It is more than probable, of course, that what Parmenides had in mind were just such “theoretically fundamental entities” as the *ἀρχαί* of Ionian physics. But this supposition is by no means necessary to guarantee the consistency of his argument. The argument indeed works perfectly well without any a priori restrictions on possible subject or predicate terms for “is,” as long as “is” is consequently understood as a definitional predication.

We might even take the argument still one step further. Since no kind of transformation of one sort of stuff into another (for example, of air into stone or vice versa, as in Anaximenes) can be ruled out a priori, we have to conclude that the only legitimate predicate—and hence the only legitimate subject—of “is” is “what is” or “what there is” in general: it is the subject-predicate that was already implied in the word “is” itself. Whatever there is can, in principle, become or cease to be this or that; but nothing can ever come to be out of nothing or dissolve into nothing. Therefore, the total mass of what-there-is remains always constant, eternally and unchangingly. The impossibility of not-being is the “ultimate limit” (*πεῖρας πύματον*, B8.42) that guarantees the necessary self-identity of what-there-is. So paradoxically, the mere indeterminate mass of what-there-is, without any further qualification, turns out to be the only real entity that truly meets the formal requirements for a perfect definition: it is what it is, and cannot ever be anything else but what it is.

One may, of course, postulate other entities that equally meet Parmenides’ requirements, being eternal, unchanging, homogeneous, and so on: Empedoclean or Anaxagorean elements, Democritean atoms, Platonic forms, Aristotelian species. However, the widely noted indebtedness of later Greek thought to the “legacy of Parmenides” should not blur one fundamental difference: all these basic entities of post-Parmenidean speculation are, at bottom, mere conjectures. None of them exhibits a self-evident logical necessity like the one that “what-is is what it is.” We may regret that Parmenides’ truth has little informative value; but as so often, a greater richness of content is bought at the price of a loss of apodictic certainty.

So when we have arrived at the end of the way, we learn that we have returned to the starting point.³⁸ Now we see that the formula “(it) is” was already the whole truth, since all that can be truly said of what-is is: “It is.”³⁹

37. A similar conclusion has been reached, in different ways, by Sedley (1999, 114): “As for why no subject is made explicit [for “is” at B2], the safest answer is that at this stage we are still investigating the logical behaviour of the verb ‘to be.’ Only in the light of this investigation will we be able to answer the question what can stand as the subject of ‘is.’ Thus, identifying the proper subject of the verb ‘to be’ is the final goal of the Way of Truth, not to be prejudged at the outset.”

38. Cf. the announcement of the circular structure of the goddess’ reasoning at B5: “And it is all one to me from where I should start; for I shall come back there again” (Mourelatos’ translation). The interpretation I propose might also provide an additional motive for preferring, at B1.29, Simplicius’ reading *ἀληθείης εὐκυκλῆος* (“well-rounded truth”), rather than Sextus’ *ἀληθείης εὐπειθέος* (“well-persuasive truth”); but nothing hinges on this controversial point.

39. This implication was clearly seen by Furth (1974, 264) and by some earlier interpreters of Parmenides: see Cassirer 1925, 41; Calogero 1932, 30; and Cherniss 1935, 383.

All the rest are but explications of what was already implicit in this one word. Thanks to these explications—the “signposts” along the way of “is” (B8)—we have learned to identify the only possible subject-predicate term of “is”: it is precisely the one already implicit in the definitional copula itself. If this “is” could be (and probably had to be) understood at the outset as a mere “sentence frame” or propositional function, this form now has become, so to speak, filled with semantic content: it implies its own subject and its own predicate.

Before going on, I have to deal with a possible objection. The “is” of whatness or definitional predication might be suspected to be a highly sophisticated technical device of post-Socratic philosophy (like the notions of “essence” or “definition” themselves), rather than a feature of ordinary language that Parmenides could expect to be transparent to his readers or listeners. It is not an accident that the examples of definitional use of “is” given by Kahn are all Platonic or Aristotelian. Indeed, it seems impossible to find any strictly grammatical feature distinguishing this specific sense from other uses of the copula. The grammatical clumsiness of Plato’s and Aristotle’s technical terms (αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστι, τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, etc.) betrays the utter difficulty of making their readers understand something that was clearly not immediately evident for ordinary speakers of Greek. Any reader of Plato recalls how Socrates’ interlocutors, when asked to give a definition of what is just, pious, beautiful, and so on, are invariably quite at a loss to understand just what they are being asked for, and only come up with random examples or enumerations. To understand what is meant by a definition, as it seems, requires a good deal of philosophical training—surely more than could be expected from the public of a pre-Socratic writer.

I have given this objection the most compelling formulation I could; but I think it can be met by starting from the spontaneous answers to Socrates’ questions we find in Plato’s dialogues. We may all too easily dismiss these “wrong” answers to the Socratic question “What is . . . ?” as inappropriate, naive, or even stupid. However, precisely these answers may give us a precious clue to the pre-philosophical, ordinary language understanding of definitional predication. Despite their inadequacy from Socrates’ or Plato’s point of view, these answers characteristically meet what we have stated as the minimum requirement for definitional predication: they state some necessary feature of the subject, something the subject cannot fail to be or to do. Euthyphro, for example, when asked for a definition of piety, answers that it is pious to insist on the legal prosecution of wrongdoers, whoever they be and whatever their crime; not to do so is impious and ungodly (*Euthyphr.* 5d–e). Though this is clearly not an adequate definition of piety, the underlying idea is transparent: to prosecute wrongdoers in any given case is what we would call an essential or necessary feature of any pious person; it is something such a person cannot possibly fail to do. Typically, this kind of “definition” takes on the form of an (interminable) enumeration like “Someone who is x (pious, just, virtuous, brave, etc.) is somebody who, given a situation type y^1 , does z^1 (and cannot fail to do so), and, given a situation type y^2 , does z^2 , and . . .” (see, for example, Meno’s list of virtues at *Meno* 71e–72a). We may smile at this inability to understand Socrates’ questions; but this was, after all, how ordinary speakers of Greek used to answer this kind of question.

Their failure—from Plato’s point of view—is that, instead of trying to give a general definition of some abstract notion or quality, they randomly name some feature (an ability, characteristic behavior, etc.) they consider essential to a thing or person who has this quality. (Their world, after all, is a world of concrete things and persons, not of abstract entities like “justice,” “piety,” “beauty,” etc.) The point here is that they all understand quite well that this feature must be an essential one, one that belongs necessarily to the character of this kind of thing or person. We might say: it is something such a thing or person must be or do “by definition.” This aspect of necessity becomes patent when Socrates’ interlocutors are confronted with counterexamples proving that the feature in question is not necessarily inherent in this quality: for example, that in some cases a just person will not give back what he has borrowed (*Resp.* 331c–d). When faced with such counterexamples, they recognize immediately that the “definition” was wrong, this time with no need for further instruction.⁴⁰

The same pattern of thought is prominent already in Homer, for example, in Odysseus’ reply to Circe (*Od.* 10.383–85):

ὦ Κίρκη, τίς γάρ κεν ἀνὴρ ὅς ἐναΐσιμος εἴη,
πρὶν τλαίῃ πάσασσθαι ἐδῆτύος ἥδ’ ἐποτῆτος,
πρὶν λύσασθ’ ἐτάρους καὶ ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖσι ἰδέσθαι;

Circe, what man that is right-minded could bring himself to taste of food and drink, before he had yet won freedom for his comrades, and beheld them before his face? (Trans. Murray [1919] 1984)

A man who is right-minded, Odysseus argues, cannot fail to act in such and such a manner. The use of the copula implies here, once again, the impossibility for its subject to behave otherwise; the connotation of necessity or constraint is evident. And this is precisely what I have called the pre-philosophical, ordinary language understanding of definitional predication. It is a pattern of thought and language that was accepted and applied by ordinary speakers of Greek long before anybody had heard of any technical notion of “definition” or “essence.” To say that something or somebody “is” this or that, in the definitional sense, means that it is impossible for this person or thing not to be this under whatever circumstances. I think this was all Parmenides needed to get his argument started. For the rest, he just had to apply with intransigent rigor the normally established conventions concerning this kind of predication in order to show that the logical conditions implied by these conventions cannot truly obtain for any of the ordinary objects of reality, nor for the basic entities of earlier cosmological speculation.

There is still another possible source of inspiration for the Parmenidean use of the definitional copula, which has already been pointed out by a minority of interpreters.⁴¹ Parmenides might well have been acquainted with the

40. A similar point has been made by Alexander Nehamas, “Confusing Universals and Particulars in Plato’s Early Dialogues” (1999, 159–75): what Socrates’ interlocutors typically come up with when trying to answer the “What is . . . ?” questions are not particular instances of the concept they are being asked to define, but rather particular ways of being pious, just, courageous, etc., or kinds of piety, justice . . . (I owe this reference to an anonymous referee of *CP*.)

41. See, e.g., Kneale 1961, 90, 98; Cerri 1999, 46.

necessary truth of mathematical propositions,⁴² which would have offered him a clear paradigm of definitional predication. A mathematical proposition says that “ x is F ”⁴³ in such a way that it cannot not be F at any time nor under any circumstances (nor can it be more or less F to any, even minimal, degree of variation). To be sure, there is no hint of mathematical knowledge in the extant fragments of Parmenides. However, Epicharmus’ (23B2 DK) well-known mockery of Eleatic reasoning seems to imply that numbers and magnitudes were a familiar paradigm case of the invariance and self-sameness of something’s being what it is, in the strong Parmenidean sense.

This would not mean, of course, that Parmenides conceived of “what-is” as a purely abstract or ideal mathematical entity.⁴⁴ Rather he searched for some equivalent for such timeless and unchanging entities in the physical world, and found it in the notion of an unchanging totality of what-there-is. In other words, Parmenides’ quest for necessary truth can be seen as a search for a kind of statement about physical objects (about something there is) that has the same apodictic certainty as mathematical or geometrical propositions. The way to find out what kind of statement this may be, and what kind of object it might refer to, consists in working out the ontological consequences (the “signposts” along the way of “is”) implied by the logical form of this kind of proposition.

Now I come to the second difficulty: the purported vagueness of negative predications. The solution I want to propose is already implicit in the suggested interpretation of “is” as a copula of definitional predication. On this interpretation, “is” means “ x is, by definition or essentially, F .” This implies that “ x is F ” is logically equivalent to the tautology “ x is x .” Hence its negation, “is not,” or “ x is not F ,” means that x is not what it is by definition. It means, ultimately, that “ x is not x ,” which is clearly self-contradictory. If this view is right, the route of “is not” is not rejected because of the vagueness supposedly inherent in negative statements, but because of the contradiction involved in the negation of a definitional predication.

This pattern of argument may be discerned in Parmenides’ reasoning in B8. If you should choose to say that what-is has become what-is, you will be committed to the assertion that at some moment it was true that what-is is not what-is, that x is not x , which is self-contradictory (B8.20). So you will learn that you are on the wrong road, the “unthinkable” (B8.17) path of “is not.”

This reconstruction may seem open to an objection that has been raised against other predicative interpretations of Parmenides’ “is”:⁴⁵ Parmenides is not concerned with a negative predication of the form “ x is not F ” (for F being

42. Not necessarily from his often-alleged contacts with Pythagoreanism (as surmised by Kneale [1961, 90]; cf. the critical remarks of Owen [1966, 317–18]). Indeed, as Burkert (1972, 401–82) has shown, the contribution of Pythagoreans to the rise of early Greek mathematics seems to have been hugely overrated in both ancient and modern historiography. But there was, on the other hand, a considerable development of mathematics and geometry in Greece during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., outside and independent from the Pythagorean milieu (see Burkert 1972, 415–27, for a concise and well-informed survey).

43. It might be remembered that this is, in Greek, the standard form of mathematical propositions such as τὸ δις πέντε δέκα ἐστίν, “twice five are [= is] ten” (Xen. *Mem.* 4.4.7).

44. A notion, I think, utterly alien to any pre-Platonic thinker: Zeno (29B5, A24 DK), as it seems, still took for granted that what is not in any place cannot be anything at all.

45. Against Mourelatos, by Furlley (1973, 12–13) and Graham (2006, 158).

some particular predicate), but with one that implies that x is nothing at all (B6.2, B8.10). I think, however, that this objection can be met if we suppose that Parmenides' assumption is that these two kinds of negation are equivalent in the case of definitional predications. If x is not what it is by definition, then x cannot be anything at all, and hence it is necessary for it not to be ($\chi\rho\epsilon\acute{\omega}\nu \acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\iota \mu\grave{\eta} \acute{\epsilon}\iota\nu\alpha\iota$, B2.5). For example, if it can be shown that "the moving object is at rest" (cf. Zeno A27), then we will have to conclude that there is no such thing as a moving object. In other words, the term "moving object" lacks reference or means nothing. The same assumption seems to underly Parmenides' reasoning in B8: if at any given moment x was not F , then at that moment it cannot have been anything at all. So the negation of a definitional predication " x is F ," reducible to " x is x ," clearly entails the negation of " x is" in the absolute sense: if x is not F , and hence x is not x , then x is "nothing."

So the two routes of inquiry of B2 ("It is, and cannot not be," and "It is not, and it is necessary for it not to be") form an exhaustive alternative, once we understand the argument as concerned with essential or definitional predication alone (where " x is F " is equivalent to " x is x "): either x is x , or x is not x , which is absurd. The other two modal forms of predication (" x is F , but can be not- F ", and " x is not F , but can be F ") are intentionally left aside as irrelevant to the issue of essential or definitional predication.

We might also say, as John Palmer has recently put it, that Parmenides is concerned at B2 with necessary truth and its reverse, (logical) impossibility, or, more exactly, with necessary being and necessary non-being. Palmer adds that Parmenides conceives of these modalities "as ways of being or ways an entity might be rather than as logical properties."⁴⁶ This qualification seems to be required since a necessary truth in the modern sense—an analytical proposition⁴⁷—need not be a truth about a necessarily existing object.⁴⁸ But as I have pointed out, definitional predication, in the Greek sense, differs from modern analytical propositions in at least one important aspect: it is true only if it refers to some real thing whose genuine nature it expresses. For the Greeks any predication of the form " x is F " (be it analytical in the modern sense or not) is true only if there really is or exists some x of which F is true. So it seems to follow that " x is F " can be necessarily true only if x necessarily exists. Therefore Parmenides was right, I think, when assuming that necessary truth must refer to a necessarily existing object.

In addition, this interpretation explains an apparent inconsistency of the goddess' wording. At B2.2 she presents the route of "is not" as one of the routes of inquiry that can be conceived ($\epsilon\iota\sigma\iota \nu\omicron\theta\eta\sigma\alpha\iota$). Later on, however, she

46. Palmer 2008, §3.5; for a detailed development of this "modal interpretation," see Palmer 2009, esp. 83–105.

47. I refer to "analytical propositions" in the rather broad sense in which the term is standardly used by most contemporary philosophers. An anonymous referee of *CP* points out to me that Parmenides' claims might well apply to the synthetic a priori as well. I think this is surely right: Parmenides' conclusions in B8 may well be understood as synthetic a priori judgments in the Kantian sense, if we assume that Kant's distinction between the analytic and the synthetic a priori makes sense at all (this is denied by, e.g., Bennett 1966, chap. 1). I think it does (for detailed argument, see Bredlow 2010, 24–32), but I see no urgent need to burden my argument with a discussion of this controversial topic.

48. A similar point was made by Owen 1966, 317 (against Kneale 1961) for the relation between timeless statements and timeless objects.

insists that “is not” cannot be conceived (B8.8–9), and the route of “is not” is explicitly marked as “inconceivable” (B8.16). This is easily explained if “is not” stands for self-contradiction and hence logical impossibility. We cannot conceive, of course, that x is not x ; but we surely can—and must—conceive the impossibility of x not being x . Evidently, the recognition that a statement is self-contradictory entails the certainty that this statement is false. Thus the route of “is not” is indeed in a certain sense a legitimate way of inquiry: in logical terms, it is the method of *reductio ad absurdum*. But it is a route that ends as soon as it begins: once it is recognized as such, there is nothing more to find out on this route. So there remains only one route to talk about, namely, that of “it is” (B8.1–2).⁴⁹

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49. Moreover, if this interpretation is right, another often-stated problem can be dispensed with as well: if Parmenides does not rule out negative predication as such, but only negations of definitional predications (i.e., self-contradictory statements), then there will be no need to seek for justifications for the abundance of negative predicates in his own arguments.

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